THE MAJESTY OF JUDAS

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The Book of Lily - The Majesty of Judas
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L'ami sage once observed: *half the time you're thinking, you're actually listening*. This book comes out of a lifetime of listening as carefully as I could, and setting down words when the time for that had come. The narratives in this book do not originate with me but *quod scripsi, scripsi*. Any errors in translation, transcription or transliteration remain entirely my own.

for Deborah
who saw this coming before I did
and without whose kindness, support and shelter
there would be no book

So the chief priests said to Pilate: do not write *The King of the Jews* but only *He said I am the King of the Jews*. Pilate answered them: what I have written, I have written.

John 19:22

There is also the superstition of the Ishmaelites, which prevails to this day... that His enemies, having themselves violated the law, wanted to crucify Him, but having made their arrest they only succeeded in crucifying His shadow.

Against Heresy
John of Damascus [*CE 676-749]*

A relationship to a disincarnate intelligence is the precondition for authentic shamanism. Nowhere in our world do we have an institution like that (that we do not consider pathological) except in the now very thinly spread tradition of the Muse. That artists alone amongst human beings are given permission to talk in terms of “my inspiration” or “a voice which told me to do this” or “a vision that must be realised”. The thin line, the thin thread of shamanic descent into our profane world leads through the office of the artist...

Art’s task is to save the soul of mankind. Anything else is a dithering while Rome burns. Because if the artists - who are self-selected for being able to journey into the Other - if the artists cannot find the way, then the way cannot be found.

Terence McKenna

And if you are in doubt about what We have revealed to Our servant, then produce a verse like unto these verses, and call witnesses upon them if you are sincere.

But if you cannot — and you will never be able to — then beware the Fire prepared for unbelievers whose fuel is men and stones.

Quran 2 : 23-24

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مريم

מרים

(Maryam)

BEFORE THE FLOOD

I have been shown so many things that I have completely failed to see -

I wasted time chasing shadows but now the darkness has been lifted. I see clearly what I have and what I have not failed to do, and I do not intend to fail us any further -

1 I see now that we will take the Holy City. [2] I see Judah fallen to us, Gilead fallen to us. [3] I see us take Manasseh and Galilee and swarm up to the heights of Lebanon.

[4] I see their Great Cities levelled and brought down, as we surge in one irresistible flood that will cover the face of the Earth. [5] The end of their murderous Empire and anyone foolish enough to defend it. [6] And this will just be the Beginning.

[7] This is the great juncture of history. Of every promise I have seen this is the clearest one. [8] Everything depends upon this single point in time that has now come very close. [9] And I see where the rupture occurs and I intend to be there to meet it.

2 I gathered the People for the last three years. [2] I did my best to hide them and sustain them but they have been harried and dispersed. [3] Even our few remnants who must now travel only by night.

[4] I had no vision of the future apart from guesses and vain hope. [5] I saw the People wielding such power, multiplying the strength that I am given to wield.

[6] In the darkness small blades are as fearsome as their greatest engines of war. [7] A child more lethal than the strongest champion they have. [8] And there is wolfsbane and hemlock and every other herb that slips so easily into wine.

[9] But these are also just disoriented children, frightened and demoralised with their numbers so diminished.

3 I was late to see the truth and so I erred. [2] There were Others quicker to the truth and they beat me at every turn. [3] I was slow to act on what I did see and that was another mistake.

[4] But the Sisters must take some blame. [5] I will make them apologise for every time they told me what I could and could not do. [6] And they will pay for every child that has been lost as a result. [7] Their ignorance and arrogance have endangered the whole world and they will bow to me once the work is finished.

[8] They demand that I hunt the Unclean the way they do. One by one, under the light of the full moon. [9] But this is slow, too

slow, it is absolutely clear to me now. [10] And it was this hesitancy that got my mother killed.

4 I have seen future histories in which we do not prevail. [2] Where the enemy stretch their talons out to crush the whole world forever. [3] But I also see that Love might finally prevail, as he teaches us so often, [4] that it might explode outwards from this point in history and never be conquered again.

[5] It would have been better for me to nurture the Two and not seek followers at all. [6] We could have felt our way towards the truth of our union in whichever way that lay. [7] We would not need stores of secret knowledge to see what we must do.

[8] But then I see the People weeping and embracing and rushing out to spread the Good News, [9] and I see that I may not have gathered these poor escaped children in vain.

5 When he speaks of Love I burn. [2] When those truths become more beautiful at the touch of his expert tongue. [3] And I soften when I return from hunting and pass by the place where he sleeps.

[4] The fire he puts within me wants to join with the light within him. [5] The Sisters shame me for that desire but I know that love can overcome even the greatest shame, [6] that Love is always made out of such joinings together.

[7] I know they both love me for how could they not? [8] I have nourished them and met their needs but what of my need?

[9] I am told to remain as wolf-mother but I am also a woman of flesh and blood. [10] I am not some dim wraith stricken with grief for men who died long ago.

6 The Sisters call me jealous because they do not understand. [2] It is not a matter of another girl taking him because that would never be allowed. [3] It is a matter of prophecy: that this world will not be saved without our joining together, [4] that we must join if we are to create a New Heaven and a New Earth.

7 I know the Sisters call me names. [2] I see them written out secretly before me and many of them are true. [3] I am an Orphan, [4] I remain Unconsoled.

[5] But they do not know why they call me: [6] the Red-Handed, [7] the Rebel, [8] the Desolator of the World.

[9] I am come to lay waste to the Earth, there is no sense in denying it. [10] But only so that a better world can be born. [11] They do not see: that the destruction that brings an Angel from Heaven is better than mercy.

THE BOOK OF LILY

SHUSHAN' EDUTH'

كتاب ليلي

BOOK 1

THE THREE

1.

He is very beautiful. If I don't tell you that part of the story now you will never understand the rest. If you could see how beautiful He was, and the heart that beat within Him, perhaps you might begin to understand.

2.

He is nothing like His brother. It is said that they are twins but it is difficult to believe. My love is dark from the sun and so capable, there is no work that He will not set His hand to. He has taken vows and does not cut His hair, He will not touch wine or defile Himself with the dead and I see the strength this gives to Him. His brother is artfully groomed and craves the admiration of women but my love averts His eyes. He is friendly and always helpful but He remains quite self-contained.

3.

His men respond to His secret strength. They follow Him without question, although many are older and larger than He is. He has no need to command them because they rally to Him out of instinct, they move whenever He moves and take up positions at His side. Together they are our safety and our strength, even when they are badly stretched by our crazed rushes through the countryside. They smile and joke and help the younger children where they can, they source provisions and they sleep in defensive positions on the outskirts of our camp. Having chosen harsh and marginal lives for the welfare and protection of the People.

4.

I would tell you so many things about Him. He can be serious and shy but He is also quick to laughter. His smile dazzles me when it comes, I am lit up by Him in a way that is difficult to describe. Before I spoke a single word to Him I knew exactly who He was, His heart is somehow visible from the outside of His body and I also see His soul. And when I watch Him with my secret sight I know there is nobody who could match Him. He makes no claim to be perfect but I see Him tower over my visions of the past and the future and I never see anyone born His equal. Seeing this always brings a tremor into me, not of fear but of longing, although it seems impossible to know such things about Him while He is still little more than a boy.

.

5.

She is something else entirely. There are so many things that are mysterious about Her, even something as simple as Her age. You would guess that She is young, very young, perhaps no more than nineteen. But when She looks into me I see things that are impossibly ancient, things I cannot interpret because they belong to times long passed. I see the world become young again and there is strong magic in it, I see phases of brilliance and squalor and phases too strange to comprehend. She commands the People as though She were ancient, they look to Her as Mother and Protector and nobody would think to disobey Her, or even look insolently in Her direction. She is beautiful but also very dangerous and none of the People have any desire to find out how dangerous She really is.

6.

By some magic Her skin remains dark although the sun never touches it. Even in the heat of the desert She wears a heavy cloak with a hood drawn over Her head. But when She goes unhooded, from twilight until dawn, Her skin glows with a strange lustre as though it were lit from within. There are symbols marked out on Her face and Her neck and they adorn Her body as well, fine lines and points in intricate patterns matching Her inner strength. When the evening comes down these markings begin to glow as though there were moonlight or starlight pouring out of them, leaving spooling lines of lit sigils behind Her as She drifts through the cool night air. She projects Her inner light outwards like a static, shimmering dome, going out as searchlight and as watchlight to cover the sleeping People.

7.

We are arrayed around Her according to Her wishes. She retains girls to herself as part of Her retinue, and there are others just outside of Her circle. And then there is me: completely to the outside, pale and quiet and strange. I know this is how they see me and it is better this way. She has Her special use for me and I know what would happen if I gossiped about it. I do not crave their company in any event, if it were up to me I would work alongside Him and His men and venture outwardly with them. But I know this would never be allowed so I spend my time mostly by myself, trying to be useful, waiting uneasily for the next time She brings me before Her so that She can See.

8.

She used to regard both Twins with the same care and concern but now Her love has turned partial. His brother speaks so lyrically and the words that fall from him are more and more about Love, his words are beautiful and insistent and She is falling under their spell. With all of Her majesty and strength She is still just an orphan child, like every one of us, and the promise of love is the one thing She has no defences against. But the opposite of love grows as She turns Her face towards one brother, She neglects the Dark Twin at Her peril and She also imperils the world.

9.

When I first joined the People both of the Twins were circumspect. They looked downwards when they spoke and traced lines in the dust with their feet. Even His brother, who spoke such beautiful words, would only look up occasionally to see whether people were listening. My love still speaks carefully and quietly but His brother is no longer quiet. He rolls out ever more beautiful words and he knows that his audience is listening. He stares out at us intently like he never would before, making eye contact with each one of us as his words surge and flow. But there is something strange and distant about the eye contact he makes, like a man who is in contact with another more hidden world, like a man who is in touch with a different source of words entirely.

BOOK 2

GATHER THE PEOPLE

10.

I have lost count of the days we have been running. We have always moved frequently but never in such a headlong way as this. It is made worse by the fact that we move only by night, sometimes from early twilight until well into the dawn. By day we make camp in whatever rough place we can find and we do our best to sleep, because there is no time to rest during our torrid night-journeys. As we tire our feet stumble more, especially when there is no moon to see by, we pick up injuries as we walk and more and more of the People are lame. There is scant food despite the best efforts of His men and even they are beginning to grumble, about this mad dash and the suffering it is causing, how much She neglects our welfare and how callous She has become.

11.

Crossing rough country at night is dangerous but there are far worse dangers by day. There is persistent talk of us being hunted and it does feel like we are prey. We jog along silently under cover of darkness and at sunrise we hide the best we can, in shallow caves or under rock ledges or amongst the densest forest we can find. At times we are forced to stop for the day in open country and this always brings a palpable sense of dread, especially while the sun beats down on us from a cloudless sky. We would complain or ask questions but She tolerates no complaints. There would be harsh penalties even for murmurs of discontent and so we are left to gripe in our inward speech, all the while wondering how long this can possibly last.

12.

I have seen parts of Her plans but there are other parts better hidden from me. I know She grows more bitter as She rushes us to and fro, finding nothing but destruction where there should have been life and hope. She seeks ways to shift the blame but the People were always Her People and She remains responsible for what has happened to them. She liberates them and She commands them, they would follow Her all the way into death and so many of them have gone that way. Our northwards march has wheeled around towards the east in the hope of better news but I know we will only find more wreckage and sorrow. We are destined to turn south again towards some fate that awaits us there. She sees this too but for the moment She rushes us from place to condemned place, trying to retrieve what is left of the People.

13.

I joined the People soon after my mother was killed. I would tell you how it happened and what little she had done to deserve it but I know enough about the Romans to understand that her death was nothing special. It left me unable to think or to speak, I was hardly able to work no matter how much they beat me. I longed to follow her into death and I had plans to do that but something restrained me and I remained alive just long enough for those feelings to break and tell me that I should run. I took nothing of any value, not even any food, and under a bright moon I crept out of the villa and ran into the surrounding countryside. I seemed to know which way to run as though my path were lit up by a silver thread, my footing was made sure by it and I covered a lot of ground. I kept running and running all night along that line until just before dawn I came crashing down into the camp of the sleeping People.

14.

The sentries gave me food and water and a place to rest. They told me She would see me as soon as She could, they gave me a bowl to wash in and refresh myself. They were very kind and they told me to make myself comfortable. I was spent from running and I slept for many hours in the dense shade of the surrounding cypresses. Then just after sundown one of Her girls came to find me and I was brought before Her. Even from a distance I could see the light pouring out of Her, She seemed too young to harbour such power and I began to feel faint as She approached. She removed my veil gently and stroked my burning cheeks and my straw-coloured braids as She laughed and pronounced me to be like a Rose amongst Thorns. Like a Lily of the Valley She said as I tried to remain on my feet.

15.

She held my face in Her hands and my soul crashed open to Her. She looked within me for a long time as She searched for my given name, and then in my mother's tongue She said: Lily. Oh Lily they already gave you that name. She intensified Her gaze and began to look through me into places beyond me and after a long silence She said: Ruth. Ruth will be your name, for as long as you remain amongst the People. She was silent again and She saw my sad heart and She saw other more surprising things, until in a faint and distant voice She said: standing in tears amidst our alien corn.

16.

She continued to look into me with growing uncertainty that was also tinged with wonder. I knew some of the things She could see although I kept my mind very quiet and still. I saw into Her as well and I knew I should be especially careful about this. I thought She might be angry or fearful because of the things She saw in me but She simply looked and looked some more and then She pulled herself back and looked outwards at the People, and in a resounding voice She proclaimed: Ruth! Ruth! Hear your Free Name and rejoice! The People clapped and began calling out my new name, that I felt was becoming to me at least for a short time, and although I did my best to restrain my other feelings the frankness of their welcome cut through me and my eyes suddenly misted with tears.

17.

In earlier days our mission was always recruitment. The smaller children would be sent into marketplaces and through city streets with their pockets full of sweet food and little coins. They would lure enslaved children with these gifts, and with kind words and promises of a better life. They would tell each child the location of a meeting point and then slip away to seek others of their kind, especially those bearing heavy burdens or the marks of particular cruelty. Most of these brutalised children lacked the will to run away, they would choke down whatever food was given and then return to their labour. But there were others who retained enough of their rebellious spirit, who were harshly treated because of that same spirit and saw no safety in remaining where they were. These were the ones who would trickle out to be mopped up by His men, to be brought before Her to be examined and given their Free Names and to take up their place amongst the People.

18.

The children we gathered were not the worst treated of slaves. We passed by mines and quarries and mills and ovens and kilns. We saw slaves seamed all over by the mark of the lash, wearing clothes so thin and tattered that their flesh was not hidden from our sight. They had letters branded across their foreheads and their ears were docked and their heads shaved in patterns to identify their owners. Irons chafed against their legs and ulcerated their skin, their faces were sallow and their eyes bleared and raw from the dust and smoke that covered the places where they worked. We would pass by these places and some of the slaves would look up at us, we would avert our eyes in shame because we had no help to give them. But the Slave Rebellion would help them, as he tells us so often, the revolt that we had all been groomed to spark, from our cadres and cells hidden in every corner of the country.

19.

She was deliberate in choosing when to create new cells. Our caravan would swell to the point where we were attracting too much attention, and Her aim was for us to be located in every place at once. She set up independent cadres in towns and in the countryside, She put them in sympathetic houses or in caves if safe houses could not be found. These children dreaded being left behind but She would insist on it and only the insane would try to argue with Her. They were left there to recruit further rebels and to wait for Her instructions. She kept a close retinue to herself and these were treasured positions, the People felt much less vulnerable following Her even in open country. We pitied the ones who were left to eke out an existence in isolated twos and threes, in hostile country with bored garrisons who longed to discover seditious elements, and to put them down brutally the way that Romans love to do.

20.

Now in a mad rush She is assembling what is left of the People. We creep from hide to hide, approaching in ones or twos to minimise any chance of being discovered. We knock softly on doors and enquire after the People by name but almost every place we search yields disappointment. Her cadres have fled or perished or been discovered and She grieves for every loss that She suffers. Occasionally we do find a few raggedy children cowering in caves, they are always in poor condition but they are overjoyed when we arrive. We welcome them and carefully re-feed them but this is not the army She was building. Her plans lie in in tatters around Her as She witnesses the destruction of Her People.

21.

Her vengeance mounts as we search each empty place but She wastes little time in self-reflection. Failure only ever makes Her more resolute, She suddenly pivots and applies herself to new plans with new intensity. And we are in desperate need of a plan. As we tire and accumulate injuries our caravan becomes slower and more unwieldy, and the remnants of the People we gather slow us down even more. They are half-starved and unable to walk through the night and they start to collapse before we find the next safe place to camp. Food is scarce and to feed ourselves we have to glean and steal, and even the talk of his miracles becomes tight and resentful. He fed the multitudes before, they say in strained voices. Why can loaves and fishes not be manifested for us now?

.

22.

One night our mood completely changes. We rest for a few hours as the night passes over us and then we get up and turn abruptly towards the south. She has new plans and the People feel Her certainty and they anticipate better things. We walk on until dawn but the new mood elevates us, excitement overcomes our fatigue and we make good progress on this night and the nights that follow. The moon waxes very bright and it becomes easier to avoid obstacles, we find safe places for our feet as Her halo of protection blooms over us. On the last night of our march She hustles us along more quickly than ever but there are promises of good things at the end of this night: warm food and proper sleep and the People would do anything to have them. His men have gone forward and no longer protect our flanks, they are scouting out our new home and will be well-provisioned when we get there.

23.

As dawn broke we came to the brink of a dry valley, with strips of green foliage hinting at springs. She was pointing excitedly at the opposite slope and we saw that there were caves, closely spaced and with a good aspect overlooking the valley beneath. As soon as we saw them we knew this was our new home and we were terribly glad to have arrived. In the dawn light we saw a couple of His men come out of the caves and wave to us, and without waiting for Her signal we began streaming down the face of the near slope and then up towards the entrance to the caves. In the general excitement She did not restrain us and our chatter rang out across the valley floor. The purpose of our coming here did not trouble us at all, the promise of sleep and proper food pushed out every other concern. We had no strength to imagine how these caves might be a place for a last stand, we did not wonder why She would bring us so close to gates of the Holy City.

BOOK 3

SEEING THE SEER

24.

Do you see your past lives? Or rather do you dream them, like I dream them, on dark nights when they gather around me and gently invade my sleep. If you do have such dreams you will learn to be careful about whom you tell, for to speak of them is to boast of a certain power and people do not like this kind of boasting. But there was no way to hide these things when She first looked into me, even if I had wanted to, that day when She pronounced my Free Name and saw many other strange things. She styles herself as the Original Seer and this gives me some protection, She sees herself as Oracle with me serving merely to be a mirror in Her hands.

25.

The first time She summoned me I was terrified. I knew some of what She had seen on that first day, I knew She intended to look again and I had no control over what I showed Her. I feared betraying my knowledge and admiration of Him, or showing Her something offensive to Her mission that might cause me to be cast out. But She emptied Her quarters and sent a girl to fetch me and there was nothing I could do except present myself before Her. She addressed me in Her lilting speech and that allayed some of my fear, as She said very softly to me: Ruth. Raise your eyes to me Ruth. I looked up at Her and She took my face very gently in Her hands, She looked at me and then very gradually within me and as I stared back at Her with my eyes wide open I could not help but look within Her as well.

26.

She has no use for my dreams of the past. Her own vision of history is vast and sweeping and far more comprehensive than my own. My dreams contain only what pertains to me, how I find and then lose a great love of many lifetimes. I lose Him to violence or subterfuge and then I die of a broken heart, and when I am reborn I am born solely to seek Him out again. I am never anyone special in these dreams but to my beloved I am always special. I lose Him so that I may rediscover Him and then lose Him all over again, my core heartbreak is never different but there is also joy when I manage to find Him again. In my loneliness and grief these dreams have become everything to me, the seeking and the finding and the desperate holding on. I never want to wake up from these dreams but She dismisses them completely with a single blink of Her eyes.

27.

My visions of the future are the ones that She seeks. Visions which come to me by day and not by night, accompanied by violent headaches that cause me to fall down on to the ground. They pass quickly enough but their aura remains, and it is though this aura that the future presses itself. I do my best not to look at these scenes because the future is far more turbulent than the past. It drags my sight this way and that no matter what future I am shown. Especially the near future, which seethes and rolls and is completely unpredictable. When these visions take me I get down on the ground and pull my head hard towards my chest, closing off my inward vision until the fit has passed me over.

28.

For some reason the future appears to Her only in static scenes. Perhaps because She is not the original seer, and so the future looks docile and unchanging. She is obsessed with various plans and seeks futures that agree with them, She feels empowered by the sight I lend to Her because none of Her Sisters can See. She uncovers audacious possibilities that become more certain as She looks at them but this is not a proper view of the future. She is seduced by visions which paint Her in a great light, Her Sisters constantly disparage Her but She sees how soon She might be crowned Queen, in majesty and splendour and with Her beloved victorious beside Her.

29.

But I have seen Her dying, dying of a broken heart that will never heal. I have seen His brother taken and killed and I sense there may be worse in store for my beloved. Out of His faithfulness to them both no matter what trouble they cause. I see dreams of Love turned towards savage molestation, I see whole worlds robbed of the Light of the Word and the disaster that results. I see this One Splendid Chance squandered amidst tears and the wreckage of broken vows, and how I must remain a silent witness to these things as I have always done.

30.

There is something even more seductive than knowing what is to come. She fixates upon the words that adorn my future vision, She finds whole vast volumes of beautiful language to accompany the scenes She sees. These words confuse me in their layered cascades and so I pay them little attention, but She loves the contours of language and Her sight is completely swayed by them. She has a secret route for bringing these words towards perfection, a route that seems very dangerous to travel but my feelings on that have no bearing. She grasps and then She sighs as She finds ever more beautiful words, She neglects to remember Her role in their perfection and She is completely overcome.

31.

Sometimes I can hear Her thoughts as though She were musing out loud, casually sorting out Her thinking by describing the way it flows. She describes arcane things that can be difficult to understand but in one phase I hear Her say: soon the Sisters will regret calling me names. The Uninitiate, the Self-Anointed, as if these are anything but slurs demeaning me for the death of my mother. As if they do anything but increase my resentment and my strength. I protect these orphaned children they would have me abandon, who love me and fear me just like a righteous mother. But then in the same phase I hear Her boast that She does not need an army, that the Word and the Power are enough to take back the high ground, and force Rome back into the shadows out of which it originally crawled.

32.

She has me brought to Her frequently. She looks deeper and deeper into me without ever suspecting that I might be looking back. She can be abrupt but She is often very sweet to me, petting me and telling me that I am such a good girl. I know the consequences of opposing Her, let alone exposing Her. If I were insolent or reckless I might offer Her some warning, to caution Her against Her growing avarice and against grasping at future things. But to oppose Her is merely to entrench Her in keeping to the same course, and nothing I could say would change the outcome of Her plans. I could chastise myself for this endlessly but in the end She remains the one who is entirely to blame.

33.

There are always other histories that the future can tell. Different versions of events that She is too driven to see. I have dreams where He comes to me in the full majesty of His inheritance, He comes dressed in fine linen and everything He has is made mine. He breaks His vows in order to be with me, He urges me to cut His hair so that I not be overpowered but I do not touch a hair on His head. His strength becomes my strength because I was made to be His, and as we merge and lean into one other we accomplish astonishing things. Even in worlds that are wholly overturned, where He is the one who covers His head and I have men at my command. He comforts me with His left hand and embraces me with His right, I remain silent under His caresses but that is never done out of shame. And there are those dreams where He takes me all the way down to the threshold of the grave, where I weep and raise Him bodily from the clutches of the dead.

BOOK 4

OUTSIDE OF THE HOLY CITY

34.

He left camp very early in the morning. He gave no warning and did not ask anyone to follow him, but his acolytes are always looking to him and so he could not prevent a small group from forming around him as he marched briskly towards the Holy City.

35.

The group moved swiftly through the cool morning towards their destination. As they walked he began to talk very rapidly and intensely about the Kingdom to Come, how near it was to coming and our triumphal entry into the city. The People had heard him speak of this before but never with such urgency, he begged them to see for themselves the immediate announcement of the Kingdom. The rocks and stones you walk amongst are crying out for it, he said, for the destruction of this world and the foundation of a better world to come. They repay his faith by proclaiming that they can hear this too, and as they sing out for him he is buoyed by their fervour and further prophecy floods out of him, amongst their singing and their weeping praise, the ecstatic abandon by which all new kingdoms come.

36.

When they passed through the Temple gates the children became hushed. They entered into the outer courtyard and he announced his arrival there, he cried out his mission and his credentials but his voice was drowned by the commerce filling the place. He raised his voice and rehearsed some of his favourite themes but this was not desert country with eager listeners. The vendors and money changers began to shout over him as he spoke, and the nearest shouted directly at him that he should take his nonsense elsewhere. He persisted in his efforts but they only derided him, calling him madman, blasphemer, they took his own words on their lips in mockery and they sneered to spit them back at him.

37.

The children shouted praise for him. They cried out that he worked miracles, that the crowd would believe once they had seen a sign. The crowd hooted back: a miracle! Show us a miracle, to prove how holy you are! They fell back into near silence as he stood there with his arms outstretched, looking around wildly at the bargains being struck in this most holy of places. He stood immobile and anguished as their mockery began again. They called him charlatan, they accused him of bamboozling children and said he would never bamboozle them. They gestured at their caged doves and challenged him to free them with a wave of his hand, they dared him to singe the ropes off even a single sacrificial animal. And when he failed to do anything their laughter became general. They parodied his manner of speaking and the way he holds himself, and their laughter cut him very deeply because amongst the People he is never mocked.

38.

As he stood there in ridicule a strange fit overcame him. His head rolled back and his eyes looked towards the heavens and he began to stream with strange words that could not be interpreted. He trembled as their power built in him and the children trembled also and then his voice broke and he simply rushed at one of the merchants and overturned the table where he was sitting. He began to scream about them defiling the House of God and he attacked other tables, sweeping them clear of their goods and votive items and trays heaped up with money. He seemed possessed of unnatural strength and the vendors felt their mockery turn to fear, and the children who had followed him to the Temple were frozen to the spot because this was not the Coming of the Kingdom they had imagined. He seemed mad and when attacking tables was not enough he took some cords and improvised a rope whip and began flailing at groups of merchants and visitors to the Temple and anyone his whip-hand could reach.

39.

The keepers of the Temple were appalled by this behaviour and they rushed out to assemble the Temple guards. But the merchants quickly recovered themselves and fought back violently, and although he had seemed preternaturally strong he was no match for the vengeance of the mob. They were incensed at his destruction of their goods and his violence against them, they too improvised weapons and his whip was no match for them. They hit him with stones and lengths of wood and even just with their fists, and he soon sported bloody wounds on his head and shoulders and defensive wounds on his arms. His entourage saw him collapsing under blows and they knew the Temple guards would be coming and so they grabbed him and pulled him towards the gates. They prised his weapon out of his hand and pulled his cloak up over his head and face, they got hold of his belt and his arms and they dragged him out of the Temple, back down though the city gates and away from the Holy City.

40.

When his broken retinue begins to trickle back into camp they chatter anxiously to anyone who will listen. They seem bewildered by what has happened but there are already some who are praising him, calling what has happened the Last Warning to the Unfaithful. To the vendors at the Temple and anyone else accused, a final test of their moral quality before the destruction is unleashed. And even as this story is told it twists again, and the People come to say that this is the Great Sign about the end of times. They sigh for how brave he was to suffer this abuse, to endure the indignities that the godless and the corrupt would cast against him. And how much greater would be the judgment against them, and how much more would they regret their rejection of the Gentle Messenger who came to them not only with words of Love but also with proofs of that condition.

41.

Word of these things quickly reaches back into the caves. She storms out towards the children who are speaking and everyone falls silent as She says in a terrifying hiss: anyone who was with him at the Temple will come with me. The children are suddenly horrified, they see Her wrath and they want to flee but they do not dare disobey Her. The only thing that saves them is the sight of him stumbling back into camp, still being dragged by the hands of various followers. Her anger shifts towards him but it breaks down the instant She sees how badly he has been beaten. She rushes to him and pulls back his cloak and sees his bloodied face, She sees the wounds on his hands and arms where he held them up against blows. He goes to apologise through cut and swollen lips and there are tears welling in his eyes and all of the faithful begin to groan for him, for the wounds he has endured so that the world might be redeemed. She pulls his cloak over him again and bundles him back into Her inner sanctum, with Her girls following tentatively behind Her. Secretly hoping they might be called on to dress his Holy Wounds.

42.

Even without Her command we begin to pack up the awnings and cooking places that are scattered outside the caves. We collapse poles and ropes and carry them inside, stacking them in dry alcoves or wherever we can find to put them. As we work She storms out again and tells us to hurry. We grab rugs and plates and washing and every other sign of habitation that the Temple guards might see. Even our refuse piles are shifted and covered over with fresh branches to prevent them from giving us away. As a final precaution She sets guards in either direction across the floor of the valley below, and along the opposite ridge where they can see for miles without being seen. She forbids anyone from leaving camp without Her express permission, She tells us to remain within the deep interior of the caves while the sun is in the sky.

43.

That night She sends for me. As She looks into me I can see very clearly just how lost She is. He has recklessly endangered every one of us but She has completely forgiven him, and his words of sorrow and tenderness have moved Her beyond any rationality. She has completely accepted his story: that this was a deliberate act to give the godless fair warning, a chance to repent and to listen to his teachings and to give themselves over to Love. And that by scorning him and rejecting him they have squandered their last chance at redemption, and must now submit to the swift and terrible judgment that will be executed upon them. He has martial fantasies but She knows it is the Word in which he excels, he needs to borrow a more worldly kind of power and She longs to give it to him.

44.

She makes plans for Her beloved but She has completely forgotten about mine. She has lost any care She ever had for Him, He stands abandoned at the outskirts of Her kingdom and I see how it makes Him suffer. It is cruel and unconscionable but I also see how it is madness to forsake the Dark Twin. She has done it so easily but She abandons Him at our peril. I would see more about Her plans but they are now held very tightly to Her chest, I would ease past Her defences but She has a very strong sense of being seen. She fears discovery by Her Sisters and so She does not suspect me yet, but that could change in an instant and I must be wary if I value my life. I must remain an inert mirror to Her and nothing more than that, and piece together any fragments of the truth She is careless enough to let slip.

BOOK 5

THE WORD

45.

They call him the Word and his defeat at the Temple does not silence him for long. He heals quickly under Her magic hands and returns to speaking almost every night. He touches on all of his favourite themes - Love, the coming Revolution of Love - but there is a new intensity in his speech about these things, as though he were now certain of previously uncertain things, as though his speech has become pressured by our closeness to the Holy City.

46.

In earlier days he spoke haltingly to the small crowds that would gather to our camp. As we moved through country he found himself speaking to listeners who turned very quickly from curious to devout. People heard of his power over words and they increasingly sought him out, they begged him to speak and he obliged them and gradually he grew more capable. His speech loosened and talk of his miracles grew and after a point it became dangerous for him to speak at all. Fine words engender jealousy and there were pointed glances amongst those who heard him speak. When he declared that the Keys to the Kingdom were in fact words, that he had been gifted those keys and the Kingdom would very soon be opened. We were often exposed in open country without any cover or retreat, and despite Her own desire to hear him talk She was painfully aware of the danger that it posed.

47.

Now he is permitted to speak only to the People. But there is also grave danger in this, a subtle danger which thrives in the intimate space his words create. When he speaks of Love every listener feels his words directed entirely towards them, his words feel created for them and for the healing of the wounds they bear in their hearts. He speaks of Love with such conviction that his words actually become Love, it streams out of his heart with his every word and phrase and it moves every heart just the same. He speaks to abused children who have never known love in their lives, they crave the least bit of tenderness and they are completely opened to him. The sincerity in his words, their genuineness and intensity: there never was an orphaned child who could hope to resist such words.

48.

Love was there in the beginning, he says, when the world came to be. And the human heart was originally composed out of Love, which is why this profane world wounds us so badly. This world which fell completely out of Love and can only be our temporary home. We seek Love out, and after our brief sorrowful journey it is to Love that we will return, to our birthright and our True Religion and what we were always meant to be. He assures us that soon enough Love will open Her books of account, and that the loveless who betrayed their true nature will be exiled from Her Communion. Our lives are a short road, he says, ending at a narrow gate, we are here only to be proved of our Love and our claim to return to that Pure Land out of which we are fallen souls.

49.

He perfects the words that he is given to say. Love is patient, Love is kind, Love is humble and gentle and slow to rancour. Love delights in the truth and dishonours falsehood. Love restores the barren places with pools and streams of water, it could turn the Negev into watersprings and the deserts into bloom. Love is steadfast and constant and always walks beside us, we cannot be lost to Love because it is not different from what we are and what we were made to be. Many waters cannot drown Love nor can quick rivers quench it. Love is the foundation of our being and our place within the world. Unless Love underpins the home they build, they labour in vain who build it.

50.

But to the wicked Love is fierce and says: what right had you to declare my statutes, or take my name upon your lips? These are the hypocrites and the Thieves of Love who give their mouths to gossip, who lie and slander and let their tongues frame deceit. You will know them if you are watchful, he says, you will hear the emptiness of their words and their deeds will ring like hollow bells. Those who barter with thieves, who collude with those betraying their wedding vows, who heap up gold and silver thinking that riches will admit them into the Kingdom. Who are cruel and who exult in their cruelty, who molest the weak and the vulnerable. Love will cast them out into the darkness, where they will continue to clutch and grasp, too full of greed to ever see: that if anyone tried to buy Love with all of the wealth of his house, contempt is all he would get.

51.

His Words of Love are bolstered by the many parables he tells. They speak about the least deserving of people, thieves and wastrels and others of that kind. These wretches lurch and founder until they admit the error of their ways, and they are always forgiven and restored by the hand of a righteous father, who rejoices to take his wayward children back into his home and their inheritance. And how much more joyfully will you be received, he says. You who are blameless, you who have been brutalised, you who have never known the tenderness of a loving parent. The Father sees how you have been beaten, how you have been degraded, how you have been violated and cast down and left to eat husks that even swine would baulk at eating.

52.

The Word is like music to every ear and that may be the best way to describe it. I know the origin of his words and what he can do with them, he perfects them as literal speech but there is much more to it than that. His words retain the arcane power of song, which is our original speech, they cut and bind his audience in a much less ephemeral way than ordinary speech can do. This impact endures as a kind of loving bondage, his perfected rhythms and the tumbling melody of his speech cutting directly through his listeners. It makes the face of every girl shine out with desire, and the longing to touch him gently and to soothe him by that touch. And there are times when he will actually break into song, and interpolate that singing speech into the rhythmic structure of his words, and this song-speech serves to cast everyone even further under his spell.

53.

His words do not end. They seem to recount endless things but even his repeated speech sounds fresh and convincing. Their priests tell you to love God with all of your hearts and minds, he says, but this is a false commandment. Because God is Love, God filled your hearts with Love. Why would God demand to have it back? There is only one commandment, he says, and it comprises three words: one is Love, one is One, and one is Another. Love One Another and he says it so often, and everyone listening knows that this part of his speech is true. When he says with sighing sounds that Love is now poised at a tipping point, where the levee banks of commerce and false religion might be washed away, so that Love will become a flood to fill every right heart instantly and usher us back into Paradise.

54.

The words he speaks transcend mere generalities. He looks out at us with his deep eyes burning and tells us that he loves us, in a personal and ordinary way, that his heart rejoices over every one of us and this really sets the People to sighing. If you could just feel the love I feel, he says. If you could let it flood you and fill you up and overspill into the world like my own love does. It takes nothing but a ready heart and the desire to requite Love with more Love, so that it builds to the point where it can no longer be restrained. Break down the dams within you, he begs, for even our small communion of People could precipitate a flood which would utterly cleanse the world.

55.

She is moved like everybody else but there is a secret dimension to Her response. When She looks into me on quiet nights She seeks out the words that nestle amongst my visions of the future. She finds words of power and words of Love and at their intersection She finds words with the power to transform hearts and not just the hearts of a few damaged children. I can never properly interpret the words She takes from me but She knows them when She sees them and She searches for them increasingly. All of these red-letter words that the future has in store. She carefully records them in the scrolls of Her heart and then imparts them to him while he sleeps. She then waits anxiously for the next night to come, when She will hear these words cascade back out of him but always made more beautiful, always completely transformed.

56.

They call him the Word and without doubt this is true speech. To take even Her stolen words and make them more beautiful than they were. The more words he speaks the more She comes to me for supply, She plunders words from whatever future She can find and feeds them back to him while he sleeps. Creating a loop of infinite perfectibility: bringing him words so he can turn them more golden in his mouth, seeking them again and again for his further purification. His words become so keen that they are impossible to resist: like magic swords that cut straight through any heart, like magic charms that raise both speaker and listener into new heights of communion and ecstasy. She falls more in love with him with every stolen word, She knows him and desires him so much more deeply than the girls who ring him tightly whenever he comes to speak.

57.

His speech always grows more personal as the night approaches its crescendo. He tells us again that we are worthy of Love because we come from a Place of Love, and to prove it he looks out at the People with tears now streaming down his face and says: I love you. I love each and every one of you. And I know you feel it, because I have no doubt that you love me too. Through his tears he repeats these declarations until the People are all falling about weeping. They cry back that they do love him, that they always will, they go to express their gratitude for his Love but sobbing chokes the words out of their mouths. These children who have known nothing but exploitation and brutality for the whole of their lives and yet they know the truth of Love when they hear it. When they hear that they are worthy of Love and find a man who will tell them so, without any fear of ridicule, who speaks to their need and their longing and the love they have to give as well.

58.

He is a master of speech and thus of crowds and he always breaks from speaking at the same emotional peak. He stutters a few times as his words begin to fail him, he holds his head and slumps forward as though he were overcome. The People cry out for him and She rushes to his aid, She puts a blanket around him and pulls him to his feet and bundles him back into the caves. The People continue to cry out for him even when he is gone, they weep for his Love given to them at such terrible expense to himself. These are true feelings although some girls also weep out of their unexpressed desire for him. They hear that Love is not partial, that it belongs equally to us all, but in their hidden hearts they long to be unequal in his eyes, to cultivate his particular devotion even as their words beg to differ.

59.

The Word is seductive but it does have tremendous practical effects. The People become more and more loving towards one other, they help and care for each other and they freely wish to serve. Because Love is patient and kind they treat each other with patience and kindness, they take on the burdens of those who are struggling and they make special efforts when they feel exhausted. All of this has the power of uplifting us: as each one makes a more loving effort it inspires others to do the same. It requires no priestly hierarchy, no tablets full of rules, although She and the Twins will always occupy their central place amongst the People. We are simply lost children who have been shown a better way, having known such cruelty that the least bit of kindness seems to fall on us directly from Heaven.

60.

I must testify however that his words do not seduce me. They are full of beauty and he has his own beauty too, he is made of the same stuff as his brother and it would be foolish to deny it. But he wants too much to be beautiful. Her girls cut his hair and lighten his skin and he looks so much like a Roman, and amongst escaped slaves I can only guess why he would covet such a look. It makes him seem indolent and cruel and I hear some of that seeping into the words that fall from him. He winds a fine cloak around himself when he speaks into the evenings, a seamless mantle of white wool and linen with a continuous blue and gold braid that must have been terribly expensive. He looks very fine and the girls love him for it but they forget who dressed him in such finery. Just to see Her gaze at him should make it very clear that She will be the one to take him, if he is to be taken at all.

61.

My beloved sits at the edges of these gatherings with His head bowed out of respect. He does not interrupt but I see Him marking out patterns in the sand in front of Him. He listens for notes of danger much more than He listens to the Word, His men also remain attuned to sounds well outside of our circle. They are protecting us of course but there is more to it than that. The Word seems not to entice men the way it entices women, men admire his faculty with words but they never lose their minds. With the One who is most lost always inclining to his side, nodding and sighing with every word that he perfects. My beloved sees the danger in this, I know that this is true, She favours the other twin but it is not jealousy that prompts Him towards concern. He feels disaster drawing closer with every word His brother speaks, He feels madness growing in the depths of our ranks and there is nothing He can do to prevent it.

BOOK 6

AT CANA

62.

We usually subsist on wild or meagre food but for days His men have been returning with all kinds of provisions. They come with wine jars to be racked up in the coolest niches of the rock, they bring strings of dried fruit and fresh fruits and cheeses. There are loaves and cakes and oil and loose baskets brimming with all manner of expensive food, they bring birds flapping against their wicker cages and there is even a goat tethered a little way down the hill.

63.

She orchestrates every part of these preparations. She rises while it is still dark and commands His men directly, She speaks earnestly with them and hands out coins apportioned towards every purchase. She stands ready for their return and weighs each delivery with keen hands and eyes and She readily pronounces judgment upon them. If any bargain is unprofitable She sends the men rushing back down through the valleys to reach better terms in the marketplace. If purchases are sound or well-made She smiles and nods Her head and each man serving Her lives for the blessing of that smile.

64.

Each one of the People has a different idea about what is coming. The girls who hang off his words say that he is coming into his power, that a real and living strength is building around the truth of what he says. They speak of stronger and stronger words soon to come, words with the power to wipe out evil just in the hearing of them, and the thought of it makes them glad just as it makes me shudder. I hear rumours of vast armies of freed slaves fighting their way towards us from the north, and from the south massed ranks of cavalry mounted on the backs of unimaginable beasts. And what will unfold when they converge on the Holy City, limitless numbers of fighting men and women who will topple the City within days.

65.

His brother listens to these predictions and they goad his speech toward new heights. He overspills with words and tears as he raves at the People about the Kingdom to Come. You see what is coming, he says, you see it now with your own eyes. We will feast on roast meat and spiced wine and this is nothing compared to what we will be served once we enter our Days of Heaven. These are the Last Days, he says: within days the banqueting will become general and it will never again cease. He speaks of long tables spread out over the whole of the current empire, bringing the righteous toward the righteous so they may exult in the company of one another, and the permanent celebration that our lives will become once we have ushered in the Kingdom.

66.

She is wholly convinced. The last time She looked into me She began to smile very broadly, as though She had broken in to some better knowledge than She had seen before. And I saw something quite bashful about Her, as if this insight had resolved Her back into the shy girl She must once have been. She rested Her forehead against mine and said: so it is written. Like I always knew it would be. She kissed me gently on the forehead and that made me feel very strange, She had never been so tender towards me and as much as I liked it I could not think how to respond. I just lowered my eyes as She stroked my braids with Her hands burning and She said: you are such a good girl. To contain so much, and to never say a word.

67.

The preparations go on for days and then suddenly the last day arrives. There is a row of high places set across the entrance to the caves, and many other places set down in the sand for the rest of us. Stockpiles of food and wine are brought out with great ceremony and we do not know what we would like to taste first. The talk about miracles returns and for half-starved orphan children this feels like an absolute miracle. His brother has made water into wine simply by speaking over it, this feast has been multiplied out of scraps of bone and a few mouldy loaves. His men are too busy to counter this gossip as they see to the preparations, and if they are annoyed by the talk of miracles they are gracious enough on this particular occasion not to let it show.

68.

Soon after sunset the celebrations begin. We spill out over the sand at the entrance to the caves and we take it in turns to serve one another. And to experience the thrill of being served, reclining on cushions like the Romans we used to indulge. Some of the People are moved to tears by these luxuries, they keep shaking their heads as though they think they are dreaming but this is not a dream. They see all of the People reclining around them, they see Her sitting up at the high place between the Twins with Her favourite girls on either side of Her. She looks luminous and sure and it is impossible not to feel blessed by Her overspilling grace when we take it in turns to serve Her. She looks upon each of us with a new and undiminished love, She is no longer something to be fearful of and this also prompts the People towards tears.

69.

She is arrayed in a garment made of some silken material, cinched around Her waist by a belt strung out of silver coins. Her sandals are soft kid leather, tinkling with little bells, and ranks of yellow and white bangles slide around Her wrists, making Her bare fingers seem more elegant than if She were wearing rings. The neck of Her garment is fastened across with a nest of fine chains run through silver filigree, scattered with tiny roses and honeybees carved out of mother of pearl. Her hair is piled extravagantly on top of Her head, held there with beaten silver hairpins that end in golden stars, and two girls stand behind Her to ensure that no strand of hair falls over Her face. They continually adjust the drape of Her garment as She submits to their attention with blushes and smiles. She is more beautiful than anyone I have ever seen, more like a young bride than the queen She has been to us, there is infinite beauty attendant upon Her and Her image is radiant perfection.

70.

She emanates such love that we are reluctant to go back to our places once our turn at serving Her ends. But there is wine poured for us and we are encouraged to drink, I am not the youngest one there but the wine is meant for all of us. The drink makes my blood race and my heart swell up in my chest, I would like to speak all kinds of extravagant words and communicate with my body as well. The night is very soft and we all glow with the wine and the People genuinely become of one people. As I drink I find cooing sounds coming out of me and I lean back and close my eyes. I giggle at how good the wine feels and how all of us are being healed by it in exactly the same way.

71.

But the wine soon makes my vision skew and things begin to look quite strange. I see the high place where She sits and the awning set up over it, I see the tassels and the rough weave of the fabric and all of it in garish detail. The past and the future seep into my ordinary vision and the more I look the more I see Her and His brother sitting together in unity until everything else is forced out of my vision. The wine keeps shifting inside me and I see this banquet bedecked with many future scenes and I keep seeing it as though I am seeing it for the very first time. I try to focus on the trays of food and the roughness of the carpet beneath me but every good feeling drains out of me to be replaced by a yawning sense of dread, and as I break through into understanding what is happening the ground falls out from beneath me.

72.

Because this is a wedding. Done secretly and yet so brazenly, hedged on every side with connivance and desire. She has not seen the visions that I see, or She has seen them and thinks that She is somehow stronger than destiny. All these dreams of disaster that have been plaguing me for so long, all of them coalesced here in one crazed moment of love. I jump up from the carpet and weave through the revellers sitting and sometimes lying on the ground all around me. I stumble until I reach the slopes outside of the celebration and I regain some footing there. The moon is bright and I want to howl at it but more than that I want my mother returned to me. Everything I have ever wanted is now being dragged beyond my reach, on this night that has becomes a night of heartbreak when the door into chaos will be opened.

73.

This is a wedding, and it will turn into their wedding night. I see that immediate future and the sudden shape of their love, I am shown the depths of Her desire that were kept secret from everyone including Herself. She tumbles down towards him full of passionate intensity, he lies pressing upwards beneath Her body but She will not let him up. She puts Her nails into him and pins him hand and foot. She holds him down at his vital points but She is surprised by the strength of his body. He is young and he is luridly beautiful, She is also young although She harbours such ancient things. Their love courts disaster but it would be criminal to call it corrupt, they are both so beautiful and desirous of one another and their skin burns in the places where they touch, and it burns even hotter in those places where there is yet no touch between them.

74.

Her image is overlaid with a thousand different images. He is steady and strong but She keeps dividing and coming at him from new angles. She tests his strength by biting him and scratching him, but even when She draws a little blood he remains steadfast underneath Her. She goads him and provokes him endlessly and eventually She succeeds, he grabs Her and lifts Her and swivels effortlessly to put Her beneath him. He goes to speak his beautiful words but She silences him at once. She wants words that are fallen words and She tells him what to say. He hesitates to say them but he is also very obedient and against his own wishes he speaks the words She longs to hear. As he takes them on his tongue they turn from obscene to obscenely beautiful, they drive Her mad and She becomes a rip-tide of fluid pleasure from the obscene beauty he creates with every touch of his tongue.

75.

I shut my eyes to these scenes but the drink makes my vision unruly. Every scene I close down opens twice as many in my mind, they crash and crash against me and I cannot make them stop. Soon I am so penetrated with them that I stop trying to close them down and I also forget to remember whether I want to make them stop. The Two roll against one another and I begin to roll with them. My blood gets hot without any warning and suddenly I begin to see Him and not His brother in these scenes. She also fades from view and it is just Him crashing against me as though it had always been that way. I surrender completely to these visions because His strength towers over anything that the Two of them could create, His strength overpowers the love of them both but it could never overpower me.

76.

Whether these visions last for minutes or hours I cannot say. They last until the drink fades and my second sight slowly abates. I sink to the ground and I say my mother's name but there is no response in the darkness. I close my eyes and try to imagine what she would tell me to do, but as that also fails I know I should go back to the wedding. This madness is not of my making but I may have some role in it, there will be suffering to be relieved and I may be the only one who can do it. As I relax the sweet parts of the wine come back into me and I know that despite all of the horror everything is moving as it is supposed to move, that the world unfolds in joy and savagery and that every moment brings me towards the next. There will be time to grieve after all of it is finished, tonight I will loosen my hair and drink more wine and be the daughter that my mother would have wanted me to be.

77.

Back at the feast there is still plenty of wine and food and everyone is in a high mood. A flute has been brought out and there are drums, and as the wine uplifts the People they get up from sitting and begin to dance. We have forgotten how to be children but the wine flows to remind us. It washes our troubles away and it loosens our tongues and our feet. I see Her get up but it is not dancing She craves, She leads Her beloved away from the celebrations and even this is cause for joy. Because they are young and full of love and they are not ashamed of their love, they will have their night of tenderness and recompense before their love is stolen away. I close my eyes and soften and spin and I also weep because the drink does what my visions can never do, it brings me back to when I could see her face, her smiling and tear-stained and ever so lovely face.

78.

As I dance I feel eyes upon me but I do not give that a second thought. On this night, unlike every other night, I have had my fill of Him and I do not care whether He sees me or not. He is of the shadows and there are so many shadows. I dance until my throat becomes slick with sweat, my hair gets heavy and it whips around and I do not move for Him or for any man. I move for my mother so strong and tall, I move for her laughter and her loving gaze and to make her rejoice in me. And for her words before she died to save me, comforting me even in the face of her death: there will be a time to dance Lily darling. There is always sorrow but better times also come. I hear her calling me by name as she died, and her promise that we would be joined after death and that nothing could prevent it, when all suffering is uplifted from us and there is no longer anything to mourn for.

عیسی

ישוע

(Yeshua)

FIRE MOUNTAIN (INJEEL)

[...] there being so many ways to begin this book or any book. Instantiations of the Word being wholly dependent upon the exhalations of a particular body, and the relative strength of any impelling spirit. But tonight I am shown very clearly: Injeel may only be set down at the end of a long journey.

Most nights [...] but the wine has done its work, and whatever resins She laced it with. Lately I have been unable to move without the People begging me for words, or interpreting my smallest [...] insistent spirit drew me out of Her inner chamber towards this small space above the entrance to the caves, through thickets and clumps of the soundly sleeping People.

[...] already swayed by the words I have spoken but they could never guess that I retain deliberately unsaid words surpassing their tolerance to hear, with the power to rupture minds and hearts and even to cause bodies to fail.

I have meditated constantly upon means to corral or contain such words and one singular answer has flashed through my mind: Injeel. Describing a kind of containment device, allowing the Word to emanate within strict confines in order

to focus and control its destructive power. Especially against unintended victims who were never the aim of such words.

I thought Injeel could only be transmitted through a ready writer [...] shown that the Spirit no longer speaks comfortably to the literate, that writing is a tremendous technology but also obvious idolatry which hardens the inner self against revelation. Breaking minds into categorical units that divide against the dictates of the Spirit, splintering the Truth so it is never heard from again.

This is revelation: that Injeel requires not One but the conjoined efforts of the Two. With One you may have revelation but no book, or book after book containing false revelation or indeed no revelation at all.

Saul must come with me. His frame is small and crooked and bent almost like a bow, but his letters swiftly and forcefully compensate for any lack of strength in his body. He listens and asks such penetrating questions that I feel he could write me into existence had I not already been bequeathed my unique bodily place within the world.

[...] sacred mountain calling us towards the East. In reveries I am shown the contours of its slopes, how deep its roots strike down into the earth. In ancient tongues it is called Fire Mountain and I accept that as its true name. We must break a path eastward towards its snowy peak to find a place nestled in the lee of the mountain, beneath the gigantic weight of rock pointing infinitely towards heaven.

My only fear is of Mary. She will be hurt by my decision and Her hurt quickly transforms into anger. I can usually soothe Her with easy words but on this hard morning I will have no words other than to say that I am leaving. Whatever has passed between us has done its work of clarifying my vision, and must go into abeyance until the work is complete. Until we have set down Injeel [...] been defeated in our efforts to do so.

Injeel will come readily enough. I have seen its closely numbered verses, alternating between declaration and parable and [...] pored over by the eyes of the yet-to-be, I see it transcribed many times by hands moving well into the future, and also means of transmission beyond the knowledge of this or any [...]

Injeel. Future worlds already grasp at it, putting up every kind of book in its place. But no writer can give them what they seek, and the unlettered who do hear the Word fail to produce books in their lifetimes, running after women or the spoils of war and neglecting to identify their scribe. Distorting the Word from its proper usage, forgetting whole swathes of what they were given to say.

What we will set down is the very thing cloistered in the Holy of Holies. The ineffable and holy Name which is also the name of Love but cut into the flesh of [...] or Love manifested as it should be unfolding into the world. Injunctions to Love or to Become Love will [resonate/sound] very hollow compared to the richly textured revelation of Injeel.

[...] will come a torrent of [similar/confirmatory] words, flooding out into the world to drown every false word there is. I will be the First but I could never be the Last, I light the way as a simple lantern does, glowing with the same light as every lantern that has ever been destined to inflame.

There is no sense in asking whether the rigours of this journey might be uplifted from me. I made my confirmation so long ago that there is no sense in [...] that I remain consecrated to the Word and I am already poured out like a drink offering. The time has come for me to depart from the People and to finish what I started so many years ago, until my body is broken or my mind dulled to the promptings of the Word that has instructed me since the earliest times I can recall.

I will go back down. As dawn nears it makes the stars to the east beckon even more brightly, but I am also struck by [a vein] of dread that I do not comprehend. Perhaps this journey might be more painful than I imagine, or perhaps I am in fear of [...]

Judah will understand. He prefers the power of muscle and sinew over the weight of the Word but he also accepts that my work is my work. I have failed to convince him of truths I see in our future but I know he will still give me his blessing, along with any material help he can provide.

Mary will not bless me. She is a young bride in love and there is no way to convince Her that Love is so much more important than any one instance of love. As genuine and intense as our feelings are they are simply our feelings, and

they cannot be allowed to inhibit the manifestation of Injeel or the preparatory work required.

[...] back down towards the bed of pleasure which was prepared for me. Easing the pressure of my desire just enough for truth to ordain my heart. Out of your beneficence and mercy and your subtle understanding of the burdens I bear as a man.

I would hope for a little more restful sleep before [...] and the necessary rising and setting off despite every inducement to remain.

[...] the hard miles and any selfish desire of my own, so that the Word can become perfect and also perfectly manifest. So that your will may be done: on Earth as it is in Heaven.

BOOK 7

THE ERROR EXPOSED

79.

In the morning after the wedding I am lying awake. I have not slept much and I feel sick and thirsty and I desperately want more sleep. But as I turn and close my eyes there comes a sound so awful that sleep deserts me immediately. The sound comes from Her but it sounds nothing like Her, it sounds more animal than human and it cuts straight through me. The People lying near me all sit upright where they were sleeping and look at each other in fear.

80.

Her cry comes three times. It blasts through the caves and hits me in the chest, swelling my throat with its alien, hollowed grief. I feel like being sick as each howl builds and tails off, each time becoming louder and more demented until it breaks through the limits of my fear. Each one of us feels accused by it and seeks to find an escape but I know without doubt it is me She will be coming to find. I think to run and I go to fasten my sandals but my fingers have stopped working properly. I am too slow to escape Her and in any event there is nowhere to hide, so I abandon any hope of running and sit by the edge of my sleeping mat, trying to breathe through my fear.

81.

After three deep breaths my urge to run subsides. I look over towards Her inner sanctum and in that same moment She appears, rushing towards me across the floor of the cave with Her wedding garments streaming behind Her. As She comes the girls near me all begin to scatter, abandoning their cloaks and sandals as they try to flee. We have slept late and they imagine this must be the transgression, they feel accused of slovenliness and they run in every direction. But She has no interest in these frightened girls. Without any of Her usual precautions She kneels down and pulls me down hard towards Her and grabs my face in Her hands.

82.

In Her desperation to see She forgets all of Her former caution. I have seen into Her previously but now Her entire soul is transparent to me. I see Her innermost heart for the first time and the secrets that are kept there, I see in sharp relief the knowledge that this disastrous sunrise has revealed. These things are made plain to me and yet they are still hedged around with warnings. I feel my mother's caution within me, saying: wise eyes are best served by a still tongue. But what would I say even if I could speak? The scrolls I now see reach back infinitely into the past, and they disappear into a now-crystallised future that is much too terrible for words.

83.

I see what She is. I see Her Sisters and their names and the places where they dwell. I see the absolute prohibition against love between these women and men, especially men who harbour real love in their hearts, who are so dangerous to the mission these women are sworn to fulfil. I see my beloved and His brother standing radiant against the darkness of the world. I see their twinned hearts and the strength they could wield if they grew together in unity. I see Her self-appointed to Her role as guardian and nurturer, and how She has chafed against those strictures and so formed other plans. I see Her desire grow to create a gulf between the Two: partly by simple accident, but partly because She took no care to restrain herself from breaching the limits of Her role.

84.

Then I am shown the central parts of the vision. I see Her error in taking His brother to Herself, the loneliness that made Her take him against every commandment of Her kind. I see Her secrets rush into him the instant they joined together, secrets that now reside within him and every dire creature knows it. The whole lore of the Sisterhood of Lupa: where they dwell and how they remain hidden, the work they do and the places ordained for them to do it. His blood now flows with their names and how to speak them compellingly. It flows with cyphers and intricate prayer-maps laying out the contours of those places where they bring their victims to be judged. And I see lists of every past victim and every future plan, laid out against still-living victims whose time of reckoning has not yet come.

85.

Everything that was hidden is now plainly transcribed, upon his skin and his bones and especially within his blood. The wicked will seize him and consume him bodily whilst keeping him alive. They will make a sacrament out of his blood and they are already thirsty for it. They will tear at his living flesh with their filed-down teeth, they will be transformed by their consumption as they suck out the secrets he knows. They will then surge out violently to destroy every She-Wolf that remains, along with every upright man, and with nothing to counter them they will build a cannibal religion, and fabricate rival religions that are in fact the same faith, and the conflict between these believers and unbelievers will grind the whole world down into nothingness, amidst terror and bloodshed and whole oceans of human tears.

86.

Finally I am shown the Dark Fire that has erupted outwards with the rising of the sun. It is this that made Her cry out so terribly, She does not need my second sight to understand what it means. The servants of this Fire know what secrets have been spilled, and they swarm against His brother in overwhelming number. The sun will beat down mercilessly today and every day as they search for their sudden prize, especially in the desert places where we are forced to dwell. These caves put us just outside their reach but Tongues of Fire will stream down right to the cave entrance as the enemy triangulates his position. And they have more mundane methods of finding where he is. He has allowed himself to be seen very clearly and there may well be Hunters who already know where he is.

87.

There is one fragment of my vision that She clutches at. A series of images that might lend Her some hope. If my beloved will accept the burden, if He will go out and draw their violence down upon Himself to buy His brother some time. I see His loyalty and His courage and I know He would be prepared to do it, but when I see hints of the horrors that might come upon Him I withdraw my visions abruptly. This is the first time I have ever checked Her sight and She is shocked to see me do it. She drops Her hands from my face and for a moment She does not know what to do.

88.

I expect Her anger but there is only broken desperation as She grabs my face again. She compels my vision in a way She has never had to and it feels brutal and unwelcome. Her inward gaze turns me inside out and She sees as though it were for the very first time. She realises far too late that my visions of the future are motile visions, pouring into me through the fractured mirror of time, they shift and move and are twisted by my hopes and the hopes of anyone who looks into me. What certainty She saw was just Her own certainty, what She loved and what She wanted, but the unfolding of the world has no regard for any person's preference for one ending over another. She sees Her wedding revealed for the grasping thing it was, She sees Her Sisters trying to protect Her beloved and not to thwart Her plans.

89.

As She continues to stare into me I see the totality of Her despair. Despite all of Her power She is still just a young woman, a young bride in love who dreamed of a world made out of Love. An orphan like me but without any memory of Her mother, forced to be all things to Herself and lately to the People. I fill up with pity and a new kind of tenderness but as I reach out to Her in this same spirit She recoils from me immediately. It is not a dynamic She comprehends, She wants to open to me but there are hard lines within Her soul that cut those feelings off completely. She pulls back out of my inner space and looks at me with surprise and pain and resentment, with each of those emotions cut through with many others that I do not understand. She shakes Her head, drops Her hands from the sides of my face, turns abruptly away from me and is gone.

BOOK 8

THE CUTTING OF THE LOCKS

90.

Deep in the following night one of Her girls comes to wake me. Ruth, she says. Ruth you must come. I am tired and my dreams were soothing and I do not want to get up but she keeps whispering at me: Ruth. She said so. She said that you must come.

91.

I pull on my cloak and put my braids up around my head and follow her as she beckons me down towards the inner chambers of the cave. On the rough ground in the relative dark I struggle to keep my feet. She has a small lamp which throws great shadows across the walls, she uses it to light her way and I keep as close to her as I can. We come to the entrance of a small chamber that is better lit and I know this particular chamber. It is the place where I am brought so that She can access my visions, where She can gaze into me for as long as She desires and have no one gossip about it. I never look forward to these times but now I brace myself against whatever wild temper She might be in. But as I enter the chamber I am taken completely by surprise. I was ready to distance myself from Her but not to be brought so suddenly close to Him.

92.

My beloved sits in an improvised chair facing away from the entrance. There are lamps set on rock shelves and also one on the small table next to Him. The table is set with various implements including a small polished mirror. I know what these things are and how to use them but I cannot understand why He would need them. As I look at the sharpened razors and the pots of ointment I feel a sharp cavern open up in the middle of my chest. Brute scenes rush into me made out of unspeakable horror, they blind me and rip sudden wound channels through the centre of my heart. It takes all of my effort not to pitch forward into the abyss, I teeter for a few seconds until these visions abate and I can breathe out and steady myself and remain upright on my feet.

93.

His bare back is hunched and His ribs show starkly through His skin. He is more slender than I had imagined but very finely made, His bones articulate smoothly as He breathes in and out and His skin is laid deftly across the scrollwork of His body. I approach quietly and when I reach the chair I brush His shoulder with the lightest of touches. It is the first time I have ever touched Him and I feel how He has gone untouched for a very long time. He feels tension leave Him as I touch Him and He sits up with a start until He sees who it is, and seeing me He smiles and relaxes down again. I am still unsure about what is expected of me, surely He cannot want me to cut His hair. But then I see how this has not been His choice, how He has been put to it by the things She and His brother have done. He looks down at the implements laid on the table beside Him, and then looks back up at me and says a single word very quietly: Please.

94.

He straightens in the chair as I pick up the razor. My hand trembles a little to be in His presence but also to think of the sacrilege I am about to commit. I want to tell Him this, I want to warn Him against the loss of His strength but I cannot find the words. And if I did speak? I would only be telling Him something He already knows. He feels me hesitate and He looks over His shoulder and smiles at me and says: it's alright. It's nothing to be afraid of. And then He says: why should my brother get all the attention? He laughs quietly at His own joke and it is one of the most forlorn sounds I have ever heard and yet also one of the most beautiful. He laughs to put me at ease with the desecration of His vows, and it gives me the strength to do anything He asks of me.

95.

I stand behind Him with the razor in my hand. He waits quietly and patiently for me to begin. His hair is thick and heaped in thick strands against the back of His neck and shoulders. I do not know where to begin, I pick up lock after lock and I don't have the temerity to set the razor to any of them. He asks me for my name and again I am unable to speak it, He ventures to call me: Ruth? And I nod and squeeze His shoulders quickly to tell Him yes, yes that is my name. He calls me by name and says to me: Ruth. I promise you, it is time for this to happen. He feels how nervous I am and also how reluctant and He repeats very gently to me: It's time, Ruth. It is time for it to be gone.

96.

He calls me by name again and that gives me strength and I resolutely pick up one of His locks. I set the sharp edge against it and just as He promised there really is nothing to fear. I cut until it comes loose from His head and lies there wilting in my hands. I want to stop after every cut but He sighs each time I touch His hair, and lock after lock falls loose in my hands and drops softly to the floor. His cut hair will be burned or buried for pressing and secret reasons but for the moment it just falls to the floor of the chamber and lies there like this is the most ordinary thing in the world.

97.

He feels each cut as a relief but I feel what it does to His strength. His power drains out of Him with every incision I make but there is something even stranger that happens. With each lock that falls a parcel of His strength flows into me, taking up residence within my body and causing my soul to swell. None of this feels accidental. I am destined to receive His strength but never to own it, I hold it on His behalf as custodian and for His benefit in some near future that beckons. I see hints of why this is so but I blind myself to that sight the instant it arises because the only thing that matters is that His strength will not be lost, it will be available to Him for as long as I cleave to Him and do not let Him go. And there is the pleasure He feels as I pull and shape His hair, when I hold it out in thick strands before me and choose where to set the blade.

98.

As I work at His hair I begin to sing quietly. It is a song in my mother's tongue that I have always known, and as I sing He begins to shiver with pleasure although He cannot discern the words. I sing that song to its end and then I begin another song in a lower register and He sighs and allows His head to loll back against me and He says: I could listen to you sing that all night. He cannot know that I have seen nights where I do exactly that, where we are nestled together in the open air and I sing because it brings Him such pleasure and it is a pleasure for me too. I have sung to Him all night and when He arises without sleep He feels as fresh as though He were newly cut from the stone. And the ancient pines we lie amongst also listen to my songs, they are no longer sung to as they were in Elder Days when the land ran with milk and honey and songs of oak and pine and elder.

99.

He has done no wrong. If I could find the words to tell Him that I might beg Him to come away with me. We could just walk out of these caves into the mild spring night, we could tell nobody of our plans and simply disappear. The cold rains have passed and the fruit trees are in bloom, the vines are setting fruit and the grass is sweet and green. We know how to travel light without being seen. I could steer us away from danger until we were far beyond its reach. We could swear that we were married and then urgently fulfill those vows, we could settle on the plains or in the lake country or as far as we wished to go. I would go wherever He goes and I would be a Wife of Valour, I would work hard and not complain and He could take His comfort in me, just as I would take comfort in Him.

100.

His hair is dark and the closer to His scalp I get the darker it becomes. He seems younger and younger with every cut, as the proof of His vows is cut away and He ages before me in reverse. I feel His responsibility lift from Him, along with the tangled insignia of His strength. His hardship drains away from Him also and I see what the People always forget: that He is still barely out of His boyhood, charged with doing the difficult work of a man. He has done things that He would rather forget, His hands are not unbloodied but His actions have always been to protect the innocent, to fight on behalf of other people who could not fight for themselves. But even these things seem to be absolved as His hair falls softly to the ground. He was faithful to His vows even when they prescribed that He must break them, He is acquitted through His faithfulness to this most perplexing part of His vows.

101.

After His hair is cut there is more work to do. I pick up the fine razor and run it quickly over the stone, testing its edge to make sure it is keen enough. I then start to angle it across the lean slopes of His face, doing my best not to pull His skin in directions it does not wish to go. The blade shaves the downy hair from His cheeks very easily, and it slides through the thicker beard growing on His jaw and chin. He continues to sigh and lean His head backwards without fear or restraint as the blade clears a path across His exposed throat. As His beard falls away He looks even more youthful, and more innocent and sincere, years fall away from Him as I shave His beard all the way down to nothing.

102.

With His hair cut and His beard shaved I begin to treat His skin. I scour His face gently with a stone until every stray hair is removed, then I pick up one of the pots of ointment She has set out on the table. It is the same balm She applies to His brother to clear and lighten His skin, I dab it across the face of my beloved and He sighs with the pleasure of me smoothing it into His skin. It comes to Him as a pleasure but for me there is something troubling about what this lotion is doing. It erases every sign of His hard work in the sun and leaves Him looking soft and indulged like His brother. He begins to look quite Roman and I know why this must be, but to me this could never seem like anything other than blasphemy.

103.

After the lotion is applied to His skin there is one other thing remaining. I pick up the rougher jar of scented wax that She has provided and I begin to stroke it through His hair. As it warms and softens I continue to pull it through, and as it grows even softer I begin to touch my fingernails to His scalp. He starts to sigh again and He also shifts very slightly in His chair. I know why this is but I continue to pull His hair back with my nails. I learn to alternate one hand after the other, reaching down to the very base of His skull where His great wall of hair always shielded Him from the sun. I pull my fingernails gently upwards from His unprotected nape, I move up from there to the very top of His head and He sighs every time I do it.

104.

His skin is soft and responsive, with clear lines delineating where the sun has hit it and where the sun has not. Underneath His beard He is almost pale, as are His neck and shoulders where His hair used to fall. I have never before wanted to touch a man and I am surprised at the pleasure it brings me. I take a loose cloth dipped in water and gently wipe His skin, I draw the cool compress across His forehead and He sinks back further into His chair. He sighs repeatedly as a token of His appreciation as I continue to wipe His brow. His face is now almost horizontal beneath me, His head pushes back gently against me and I push forward to show Him how I feel. His breath deepens and catches on itself as I soothe both of His burning cheeks, and the slight roughness the razor has left when cutting around His chin.

105.

I set the cloth aside and look down at Him. His eyes are closed but His lips part slightly as I stroke His face with my hands. I move my face down towards His and hesitate for a moment. I want to kiss His brow which seems hot with tension but I don't know whether I should. It feels forbidden but I feel myself move downwards until I am pressing my lips to His skin. As I do that I feel all tension suddenly leave His body, to be taken up with another kind of tension that I also feel. I leave my lips pressed against His forehead for as long as I dare, and then I pull my mouth up just far enough to hear my lips come unstuck from His skin. I shift down softly to kiss Him on the bridge of His nose, I kiss Him at the very tip of His nose and I know that I should stop but I have lost any will to do so.

106.

I bring my lips all the way down to meet His lips. His body slackens with initial surprise but then He pushes back up to meet me with the kisses of His mouth. We are facing the opposite way to each other and I part my lips just so that His bottom lip can slip slightly into my mouth. I push my head forward and open my mouth a little more and I am grazing His bottom lip with my teeth. I do not know what I am doing but I like doing it and I know that He likes it too. His hands rise up to take hold of my head on each side at my temples, He splays His fingers across my coiled braids and pulls me very gently down towards Him.

107.

I kiss Him without thought or restraint and certainly without any technique, but I seem to know exactly what I am doing and just how it must be done. I taste His tongue and feel its roughness as it opposes my tongue, my hands move underneath His nape and pull His heavy skull upwards towards me as He pulls my head ever more insistently down. We flow against one another and also within one another and I hear a voice calling this our Kiss of Death because He now has me unto death. Because I shepherd His strength and He flows with my deepest secrets. I see how He has genuinely become mine, and that He always was, the Word within me proclaiming that His ramparts are mine and His battlements are mine, and everything He ever was or will be resides also within me. I am invested with the keys to His rightful kingdom, the keys to the gates of His most sacred heart.

108.

Our kiss comes to an end and I slowly pull myself upright, with my hands still cupped around both sides of His face. I feel wetness against my hands and I realise He is in tears. With my thumbs I wipe His tears across the top of His cheekbones and into His hair but they are only met with further tears. I bring my face down beside His and feel His warm tears touch my cheek, and suddenly tears are also coursing down my face as His sadness merges with my own. Out of what I showed Him when I was kissing His lips, His foretaste of things He no longer has the strength to bear. I go to pull my head back but His hands move gently to stop me, and as He holds me steady with His warm hands He presses my face against the side of His face and breathes in sharply and says: Ruth. Forgive me for calling you that, now that I know your True Name.

109.

She does not know everything, He says. She thinks that She does but She lies when it suits Her and She lies even to Herself. He wipes His tears with the tips of His fingers and then calls me by my name, saying: Lily I have no idea why I must tell you this but I am sorry for what I have done. Every time it seems that I am the mad one, I try to be so virtuous but it only causes pain, and in the end it does nothing but break your heart. I think I know better than other people and this is my worst fault. He keeps wiping tears out of His eyes but they are no longer tears of relief, they are the salt, sore tears of self-reproach and His insight into the past. I move to wipe them away for Him and He shakes His head and says: even these tears, Lily, you would wipe away for me. Why do you always comfort me, as I drag us towards disaster?

110.

Then He says words that I have never before heard. I do not know why we come into this world, He says, or when we might return, but I know that I must tell you: meet me on that day when your Full Name will be revealed, on that night beneath the mountain when Love streams back into the world. I will be given breath for the sole purpose of asking where you are, and you will know me in the instant you meet me just as scripture says. Underneath the mountain, Lily, where the streams converge in the wilderness, when Love speeds through the world to heal every broken heart and there is nothing to yearn for anymore.

111.

When His words are finished we remain quietly with one other. It pains me to see Him speak so harshly about Himself and I look within myself for better words, words of reverence and honour and the means to say them to Him. I find words of praise that were spoken of Him long ago, and there are words of love from future writers and the devotion with which they are set down. But His life mostly becomes a byword for condemnation, with so many cruel words welling up against Him, and although I would spare Him any trace of these accusations there are already hints of the future folded within Him. He sees their turbulent streams, I would show Him praise but He hears their black words increasingly and He cannot make sense of them.

112.

In the end it is enough for us to remain together in the soft light of the chamber. He shifts back upright in His seat and wipes His eyes, and as I also wipe my tears He says: a fine couple of revolutionaries we are. He grins as He half-turns to look at me and my tears retreat and I smile with Him and He says: there she is. And then He says something very simple that clears my conscience and my whole heart at once. Thank you, He says. And then something like: I owe you one. I smile broadly and look down at Him and squeeze His shoulders to tell Him the very same thing back.

113.

I hear people approaching and suddenly I feel exposed and ashamed. I look down at the little table and begin arranging things on it so I can keep my eyes downcast. A group enters the chamber and I glance up and see it is Her with Her full retinue of girls. As He stands up to greet them the whole entourage stops dead to see how changed He is. I could never confuse Him with His brother but the girls do so completely, they do not see Him with any inward sight and so they are hopelessly confused. He has that preening Roman look exactly like His twin, and although He harbours such a different heart they all see Him with the same desire they feel for His brother. Thinking nobody knows.

114.

She has made a heavy necklace for Him, strung out of the fine silver coins that made up Her wedding girdle. She tells Him that it will protect Him and guide Him, through Her power which owes to the moon and its effect on subordinate metals. She drapes it around His neck as He bends His head to receive it, but as soon as the metal touches His skin He stiffens and grimaces. It doesn't feel right, He says. She tells Him to give it time but He begins to shudder and reach for the necklace and He says again that the silver doesn't feel right. He holds the necklace clutched in His hands for a moment, and then He pulls it straight over His newly shorn hair and drops it on to the floor. This does not belong to me, He says. You should render it unto Caesar, aren't these my brother's words? As you intend to render me too.

115.

I have seen Her anger before but this is something more glittering and dangerous. At His rejection of Her gift in front of Her whole retinue, at seeing how He would now choose me over Her. I look down and away but not before I see Her eyes flashing with green fire. She becomes terrifying and even He trembles at the wrath that is to come. But Her composure suddenly returns and She becomes haughty again, lifting Her face to Him and stabbing Her finger at His chest, saying: have her then, you stupid boy. Take any one you like, in the hours that are left to you. Oh yes they will remember you, and likewise your brother, but because you are false and fleeting and perjured they will slander you for your sins. They will forget about me, as it seems so easy to do, but you would be glad of mere forgetfulness once you see what is in store.

116.

The retinue leaves us abruptly and the fallen silver stays. And only now that the preparations are complete do I see how exhausted He is. He stoops a little and breathes hard and I beckon Him to come into the bedchamber that has been prepared. He sees the soft bedding and He begins to protest, He sleeps on the ground like His men do but I gesture for Him to lie down. I leave briefly to pull together a little food, small cakes and a cup of water, but when I come back His eyes are closed and His breathing is deep and rhythmic. He does not wake up as I set my offerings down beside Him. I find a small sleeping mat rolled up against one wall of the chamber and I unfurl it at His feet, carefully uncovering His feet so as not to wake Him. I know that His sleep will be better if I remain there with Him, and so I lie down and smell His warm scent through the unguents I have used to anoint Him. As I lie there listening to His breath, gently feeling my way towards Him.

BOOK 9

TO THE GARDEN

117.

Early in the morning I feel Him stir. The girl who comes to rouse Him is shy and barely whispers at Him but she leaves us both awake. He lies still for a little while and I lie there with Him, hearing Him collect his thoughts quietly in the early darkness. I would love to lie with Him for longer into the morning but after a few moments He leaps to His feet and pulls on His outer clothing. He is very fleet and once He is on His feet things happen very quickly. I barely keep up with Him as I pull on my cloak. He looks at me with some surprise but He is so taken up with what must happen today that He cannot stop to wonder why I have spent the night sleeping at His feet.

118.

We emerge from the caves to find the morning clear and fresh. My beloved goes around rousing His men, He wakes the nearest first and they rush around waking everybody else. He waits for them to assemble around Him before announcing that they are heading out early and all of them together. They nod in assent like they always do. Then as they look at Him He smiles and says: I may have done something to my hair. He pulls back His hood and they see what has happened, they are shocked at this transformation and they stare at Him aghast. He preens and adopts a couple of heroic poses and they gradually begin to laugh along with Him, they reach out to rough up His hair and they call Him by His brother's name. The tension of the moment breaks but the clever ones retain a wary look in their eyes. They know something strange is emerging and that we are going out to meet it.

119.

We tumble out of camp and down into the valley below. As we walk the men joke and laugh and my beloved seems uplifted by their mood. We move quickly over the open ground, hugging the valleys and the northern side of the hills, passing field workers and shepherds and farmers burdened with produce on their way to market. I have not walked this way before but the closer we get to our destination the more it seems overlaid with significance, like I am moving just ahead of events as they unfold behind me, leaving behind familiar scenes that play out slightly differently every time they occur. But our purpose is the same and the contours are the same as we skirt the hills to avoid the morning sun, although this time the sun will barely have risen before we reach our destination.

120.

As we walk I see familiar forms appearing out of the landscape. Their shapes twined around the outline of trees, or as faces emerging from the shape of rocky outcrops. They seem inert because their thoughts are so slow but they watch over our journey and hint at directions we should take, thwarting anything malevolent that might come after us. I see them often enough but never so clearly as today, in clumps of dense foliage, in the way the wind diverts down one side of a grassy field as they lie down on the other. They watch over the young particularly and every tradition says so, these protective spirits who are not omnipotent although they do have grave power. They record all deeds especially the harming of the innocent, they open their ledgers in that transitional space which surrounds the land of the living.

121.

When we reach the Garden He tells His men that we will stay here for the day. It is still early but He tells them to rest in the shade and get some sleep if they can, or to retreat to the nearby grotto if the day becomes too hot. He says something about why He has brought them to this place and for once His men begin to openly dissent. They do not understand why His brother deserves protection, they see the danger it puts Him in and they beg Him to reconsider. But after some frank words the men see He is resolute and they agree to abide by His plan. They confirm their allegiance to Him and my beloved takes courage from it, saying: It is only for one day. I will not need your faith in me for any longer than that.

122.

He leads me out of the Garden and up the near hill. I have no trouble keeping up with Him but He still looks back and smiles at me every so often. We climb towards the summit of the hill and sunshine begins to pour over us, although He keeps His hood pulled firmly over His head. We arrive at what looks to be a graveyard and from the way He stills and steels himself I know this must be the place. He gives me brief instructions and I stand in the shade while He goes out amongst the graves and grave-markers that are now standing in the full sun. He walks out into the bright sunshine and throws off His cloak, I see Him kneel and bend His head and extend His hands palm upwards but nothing else happens for a long time.

123.

Just as I am about to look away I see a slight fluorescence grow around Him. I see Power drawn down into Him, and I realise that He means to expend this Power and all of His residual strength to draw down the sight They have turned towards His brother. He begins to flare and shimmer in the sun and my view of Him becomes obscure, but with my inward vision I see how He engages Them and it is an ugly thing to witness. He flings insults and threats and accusations out in every possible direction, these are not the beautiful words that His brother speaks but He harbours much more powerful words. I retreat into the far shade and I try to close off my sight. I feel like a spectator trapped in some gruesome arena where the bloodshed has turned general and the slaughter has become too much.

124.

As He burns and postures in the sun I see exactly why She had me cut His hair. Why She has defiled Him by sending Him out amongst these graves. If He had retained His former strength He might have wrenched down their palaces with His bare hands. He could have devastated the Romans almost without exertion and that would just be the beginning. I see His soul bloating outwards to the point where He exercises His strength for the sport of it, I see Him kill His brother and take Her as His slave and enslave every one of Her kind. Out of His vast Love awakened too early and crushing everything in its embrace, turning Her slave revolt towards a Slave Religion that would never let the world from its thrall.

125.

What fragments of His strength do remain are eventually exhausted. When He walks back to share the shade with me a few times during the day it hurts to see Him so diminished. He cannot eat but He does take a little water before He heads back out amongst the graves. Each time He kneels I see more stutters in His strength, I see Him more and more laid low but He succeeds in diverting their attention. The sun makes its way down towards the western horizon and as the light slants past a certain point He collapses forward on to the ground and I know that He is done. I steal out of the lengthening shade towards Him and He sees me come, and as I help Him up He sighs and manages to laugh gently and say: it is finished. Thank you for staying with me. We should go back and tell the others the next part of the plan.

126.

I help Him stagger back down the slope until we are almost in view of His men. He does His best to stand upright and smile but none of them are fooled when we shamble back into the Garden. He takes a waterskin and the little bit of fruit they offer Him but He brings neither food nor water to His lips. He is sunburnt and half-crazed with the sun and none of them know what to do. As He tries to reassure them and say His farewells I move far enough away that I can't hear what they are saying, but I still see them hold their hands out to Him and plead against this madness. But after all of their cries and remonstrations, their warnings and their grief, I know in the end they will do exactly what He asks them to do.

127.

The men gather their things and dole out their food and their silver, a portion to each of them equally and the same. They kiss Him on both cheeks and tenderly embrace Him and it is a tragic scene I am now called to witness. How loving and brave these young men are even to be parted from one another, with each one facing an unknown fate and possibly a fate worse than death. But as their farewells finalise I hear laughter somehow ringing out in the face of all of it. I see the young and the very young smile and shake their heads and resign themselves to what must now be done.

128.

When His men have dispersed He lies down and groans in the early twilight. He has completely exhausted His strength and it is pitiful to see it, with His hair cut and His courage drained out by His brutal exertions in the sun. I come near Him and sit quietly and listen to Him think, I try to console Him with visions but I do not know how much He sees. I keep thinking how I might take Him and hide Him at least for another night. The darkness is not their domain and we could move quickly under the moonlight. But as soon as the sun rose we would be captured and taken, and if He drops from their vision they will immediately turn back towards the hunting of His brother.

129.

Not every Roman is corrupt and this is His best chance. To deliver Himself to the proper authorities in the hope of some kind of a trial, securing days or even weeks for His brother to be hidden and protected. My beloved is not known to have broken any law and He might well be spared the worst of their punishments. He knows as well as I do that this is a faint hope, but even a few hours in captivity might make all the difference. And after His exertions in the sun, the fools that He has made of them, it would be better to be taken publically than to be savaged in secret as soon as the sun rose.

BOOK 10

IN PRAETORIUM

130.

As we approached the gates of the Holy City I let go of His hand. He walked a few more steps as I fell behind and then He stopped to look back at me. I motioned for Him to go on which He was reluctant to do, He kept stopping to look back at me as I fell further behind. He was hurt by what I was doing but there was no way to explain that I needed to remain in His wake. That I had to sever our bodily connection so that when He was taken I would not be taken with Him. I was leaving Him in order to preserve us both for the coming ordeal, to help Him though the tribulation and the terror He was going out to meet.

131.

I was surprised by the abilities I found within myself. I was able to withdraw almost completely from my being-in-the-world, which was already tenuous enough, and by stilling every particle of my body I became pale and ghostly and unseen. My beloved still felt me near Him but upon the minds of other people I made very little impression. The matter composing my body ceased to vibrate and everything passed through me and I was brought down into a state much closer to death than life. I could have passed directly into death had I wanted to, through the fissures in the world that opened all around me as my body stilled. But there would be no return if I were to enter that state and lose my connection with the living, and with the light of His heart that now seemed to be the only light left in the world.

132.

When we arrived at the palace compound He demanded to be admitted. He gave them the name of His brother, claiming to be a servant of Rome who had been summoned there on urgent business. The guards were on high alert against any storming of the city and they told Him to move on, but He assured them that they should not let Him go without at least announcing Him to their masters. They asked Him for papers or formal proof of His business but He merely repeated His request to be announced. In the end they sent a refractory messenger back into the compound to announce Him, and it was not long before the inner parts of the Praetorium erupted with a mixture of triumph and fear. The elite guard were dispatched to where He stood, they took Him and bound His hands and dragged Him inwards through the merest crack in the palace gates.

133.

She had given Him words to say to them, and although deception was not His element He made a brave show of it. Speaking in the stolen cadences that His brother would have used, mimicking his gestures and the way his eyes search his audience. He claimed to be one of them and in fact the greatest amongst them, He promised all of His secrets including the dwelling places of the Elect. And without comprehending His own words He promised that the witches would be theirs, that He would split their stealth wide open for their legions to hurry through. He called them night-hags and turnskins and the very worst kind of whore. He vowed that He would make Her pay for deceiving Him for so long and for deceiving His brother also. The Romans swelled against Him with an express desire to kill Him but He assured them that a few secrets stolen from His corpse would be nothing compared to what now ran within His living blood.

134.

He had them running backwards and forwards in a flurry of indecision. They debated His words and what their meaning might be, the vindictive wanted to kill Him but others craved the secrets of His living flesh. Their seers clamoured to try Him, with some of them glancing in my direction as they cast bones and muttered and prayed. They plucked hairs out of His head and burned them to ash, they cut His fingernails and put a pumice stone to His feet. They burned and dissolved the results of every enquiry and they failed to learn anything. As the night wore on many lawyers and scribes arrived from the surrounding countryside, ruining their horses in speeding to the palace in their rush to interrogate Him. Some pronounced that He was not the One while others shouted to preserve Him, knowing what would be lost if they killed Him in error, and fearing what might befall them if what He said was true.

135.

Eventually they came to a middle way and decided to examine His blood. He refused to let them take it and this activated their cruelty, they directed that He be flogged with lead-tipped leather thongs and that His brow be cut by thorns. He was bound to a pillar that His old strength might have brought down, but in His weakened state He could not prevent them from scourging Him or jamming a briar crown down upon His newly shorn head. They scraped up the blood from His various wounds and put it in their vessels, they subjected it to fire and admixture with quicksilver and they cast their spells around it. They were thorough to the point of tasting His blood but they did not have to exhaust every possibility before they broke in to the truth. They found no knowledge flowing within Him and they knew all His secrets were lies.

136.

This was His moment of disaster and triumph. His captors knew they had been tricked and that their real prize had escaped from their clutches, they guessed that His brother would now be days away and they gnashed their teeth at their stupidity. They cursed Him with terrible ferocity for having deprived them so easily, stealing this unique chance to destroy the Daughters of Levi. And the pathetic means of their deprivation: an escaped slave who had simply cut off His hair, an illiterate boy who had deceived them in this most momentous of things. In their impotence and rage all they could do was slander Him, and accuse Him, and make names for Him that would ring in infamy down throughout the ages.

137.

They slander Him with every name that their cowardice can imagine. They call Him traitor, son of perdition, false friend, money-lover, the puppet and the liar and the One For Whom Hell Was Built. Calling Him false suitor, kiss of death, dealbreaker, grave robber, swindler, betrayer. Slandering Him even for the colour of His skin: the dark and the swarthy, the shady and squint-eyed, the Black Prince and the Black Son and the Black Sun. Every slur that could possibly be flung: unclaimant, false coiner, blood-libeller, Ruination by Silver, schemer, treacherous, lascivious, vow-breaker, Ration of Whores, the unsuckled and the unloved, the remorseful, the unforgiven. And so too have you said: blood-moneyed, Strange Fruit, rope-wearer, tree swinger, the broken open, the drawn and the quartered, the better unborn, false witness, breaker of hearts, God's Fool and the Prodigal Son.

138.

But these names will be countered by the opposite claims of the faithful, who kneel before images of His suffering and call Him the Saviour of the World. They call Him Deliverer and Liberator and Harrower of Hell, they praise Him for the sacrifice He made at such terrible cost to Himself. I hear Him called Conqueror and the Risen Sun and the One True Light of the World, He is called Courageous, the Son King, the Great Hope and the Glory of the World. Some more closely instructed call Him the Lion of Judah, the Black Sun, the Unsung Hero and the Hidden Purpose of the World. And there are those receptive enough to call Him by His true names: Brave Judas Iscariot, the most slandered son of the world, the self-hanged God so viciously accused for the latter part of history.

139.

They curse and rage against Him until they see it only wastes more time. He stands revealed as a mere proxy and nothing more than a shadow, while their true prey slips further away with every moment they waste. Just a few hours before my beloved entered into their palace as a future King, they crowned Him with thorns and now they deny Him even that mocking honour. Their magicians and seers wash their vessels thoroughly, their leaders wash their hands of Him and order Him taken from their sight. He is brought down to the lowest levels of the compound and flung like a dog into a cage, with the half-mad inhabitants jeering at Him as He is cast down before them, calling out Handsome Boy, Handsome Boy, this is what happens when you don't do what you're told.

140.

They beat Him before and they cut His brow but that is nothing compared to what they do to Him now. They pick the most sadistic of their guards and these brutes know what to do. They drag Him around by what is left of His hair, they tie Him to a rack and they kick Him and spit on Him and drench Him with their urine, laughing all the while to see Him so degraded. They dole out as many lashes as His poor body can stand, they scourge Him until His skin hangs in strips from His body and they continue to slash at what muscle and bone their whips expose. They leave off beating Him only when He is nearly dead. They are instructed that this man is to hang and so they preserve His life for that purpose. He is so wretched and spent that there is no need to guard Him now, His cage will hold Him easily as the other inmates delight in humiliating Him in any further way that they can.

الصديق
רות
(Ruth)

TENEBRAE

Now comes the agony of His long dark night. And the dismal places I go to seek Him some reprieve. Staking everything I have for Him to be torn back out of the world before His ultimate suffering comes, until my pores flow with blood and the sweat and the tears are drained out of me -

I know you have also begged for such relief, fighting every inducement to end your own life so you can avoid bearing witness -

Pray for Him on this night when He should have died of His wounds. Beg that He not be made so stubborn and so proud. Send tears back into the Maundy darkness where He somehow maintains His life -

And to every place I visit on my night-journey. Knocking and entreating like some crazed, mendicant priest. To end His life before the dawn ever begins, or to forbid dawn from coming back into the world when this ghastly night of Tenebrae finally reaches its end.

BOOK 11

TELL THIS TO THE PEOPLE

141.

You know how this story ends. If there is one thing that the future tells me it is that you have been told. My task is merely to rectify the detail, to say who suffered blows and who was hung. Out of His love for His twin brother and for the salvation of the world, out of His decency and courage and not any lust for silver.

142.

The Romans proliferate their temples endlessly and carve this story on their walls, the profane glorification of the death of an innocent man. You have seen Him beaten, abject and bleeding and torn, you have seen Him mocked and pierced as they play dice for His clothes. You have seen the earlier parts played out too, seen Him stagger beneath the terrible weight of the cross they will use to murder Him. And every other story that is in fact the same story, the end of every Slave Revolt playing out like every other. Against the shameless face of their oppression: every earnest, loving, helpful young man, tortured and killed for the love they have within them.

143.

One thing you have not been told is that I was there. I saw Him emerge into the cold light of day, I was there when they laid the timbers upon Him and He buckled under their weight. I walked beside Him like His shadow and witnessed them goad Him like a beast, to get up under His burden again and again and drag it towards Golgotha. Through all of it I was with Him, regardless of how much He would have wanted me to leave. I stayed with Him even though I could not look in His direction, because I knew that even in His extremity He would try to smile at me, and that one thing would have broken my heart and ended my life at the very moment He most needed me to stay with Him.

144.

For the first time in my life I was not merely a witness. I stepped forward to find I was able to take His suffering upon myself, at times almost completely, and I moved forward gladly to embrace this new skill. Out of some route He had opened within me to take up the worst of His pain. I felt Him soften and exhale every time I took His pain on, He was reprieved every time I exchanged His old strength for His current agony. And He knew what I was doing, I feel sure of it. He tried to set limits on the pain I could uplift from Him because He did not want me to suffer, and this halting exchange between us continued all the way to the end. Every time His strength failed I was there to be His strength, and every time He used that strength to pull pain back out of me and upon himself again.

145.

His ordeal was long and bitter and I gave Him such comfort as I could. Spending all of the strength He had relinquished when He had me cut His hair. The sun flared very hot as noon passed overhead, and in His beaten state it began to wear Him down badly. I sent Him every bit of strength I had left but He slowly sank beneath my reach, and as the sun blazed overhead I found limits within myself that could not be surpassed while my soul remained in the world. He sank more and more helplessly against the timbers, He had lost so much blood and His eyes were blinded by blood and salt and dust and the glare of the sun. He gradually became mad with heat and thirst and as death stole towards Him I could not hold Him steady. He no longer knew where He was or what had happened to Him and He could not feel me with Him no matter how desperately I reached out.

146.

This part of your Book of Heartbreak is true. As death called Him onwards He strove to remain in the world but He could no longer see me or feel me there kneeling at the foot of His cross. Amidst all of His suffering this was the most terrible thing, to think that I would rise and turn my back and walk away from Him. With His last few breaths I heard Him cry: Lily, Lily, why would you abandon me? Not out of anger but in puzzlement and heartbreak and I will testify that this is the worst part of this story. He wept for me forsaking Him even as I knelt there in tears, reaching out towards His soul to tell Him I was there. But your brutality had put Him beyond reach, He neither saw me nor heard me and I want you to know that this is the way this boy died: despised, rejected, brutalised, and abandoned by His only love.

147.

He was so young. You call Him a man and He did the work of a man but in His skin and His bones He was hardly more than a boy. On that day He was the youngest hanging on the hill, with His face shaved and His hair cut back to reveal His youth and vulnerability. Dying for the love of His mother, the only mother He had ever known, who had divided Her love against Him and cast Him into heartbreak. And His image will be used to break the heart of every mother, to deny every son of her love and affection, because the best of our sons are doomed to die and so it is foolish to love them. This lesson intended to end all maternal affection, with the blood of the Son shed to satisfy His brutal and jealous Father.

148.

When He died there was no thunder or lightning. The sky remained clear and the sun hot, although there were storm clouds massing above the hills to the East. I felt Him slacken and breathe out and He did not take another breath. In that moment I was afforded a sudden peace, allowing me to recover myself a little, I fell back from my efforts to comfort Him and began to sink into my grief. But as I softened I felt the approach of a strange swarming presence, rushing with the touch of many djinns as they began to swirl around His body. They came together in order to seize His soul and they whispered in triumph as they bore His soul away. And suddenly He was lost to me, taken far under worlds to a place where I could not reach Him, and from which His soul lacked even the slightest chance of redemption.

149.

As my beloved was snatched away I felt my vision fracture. I saw the future infinitely overlaid upon the present facts of His death, I saw portraits of His suffering splay out in every direction throughout history. Every step of His broken feet, every breath His poor mouth struggled to take. They nail Him up millions and millions of times, His heart is always pierced and His brow so cut with thorns. They luxuriate in images of His torture and I cannot comprehend the heart of the Roman. Everything is violence and degradation, overlaid with a tyranny called peace, every road leads to cruelty and the astonishing luxuries they crave. Their empire which continuously prevails until the whole world is on its knees, His brother railed against the sins of Babylon but Babylon was nothing compared to the ultimate sickness of Rome.

150.

There are some stranger things that the future also shows. Their artists restore His hair to Him because they can sense what it means, they boast that they took Him at the height of His powers and that they were never deceived. But I see the colours they invest Him with and I know why they do it. Why His skin is as light as my skin and His hair is the colour of a lion, why His beard is shot through with the gold of my hair and His eyes are pale like mine. These are not His colours but artists do not lie, they sense me merging with Him as I knelt at the foot of His cross, they depict our tenderness and connection and how I nursed His stolen strength. They show our twinned strength as it was poured out between us, they show our joint suffering but also the colours of our love.

151.

The faithful bow and scrape but they fail to read the signs. Like the riddle posted above the cross on which He died, the four initials of two brave men painted in the language of the Romans. Asking of anyone who can read: is this Jesus of Nazareth, or is it the Majesty of Judas? Because this is the greatest pleasure of the ugly and corrupt, to dangle their misdeeds in front of you, knowing not a single person will interrogate these signs or ask themselves what they mean. They taunt the decent and the kind, they boast of their murderous exploits and force you to kneel down before them. But the sign-maker knows, the artist always knows, leaving all of it written down for the truth-teller when he comes, when their brazenness is uncovered as emptiness and the facts become plain to see.

152.

So to anyone with understanding: go into their temples, the way His brother was brave enough to do. Interrogate their idols, that are only wood and iron and clay. Demand that they reveal the truth to you and it will be revealed. That would be enough, to preserve the dignity of His memory, but I would be lying if I told you this is all I want you to do. I want these temples desecrated the way they desecrated my beloved, and every other suffering servant it has been their pleasure to kill. But violence does not engender peace and so I will restrain myself to asking that these temples be shut down, and walked away from, that you shutter up every crucifix that lines their Appian Way. And that their priests be instructed that that these are not images of Love, even in the false story they tell, these are craven images of the destruction of love, the love of His men and also my love and all who are lost without Him.

BOOK 12

FURY

153.

When He was gone I slumped back on to my haunches and felt the life go out of me. There was no longer any need to be strong for Him because He was now beyond any help. I had been in a state of constant weeping but now He was gone my tears withdrew and I emptied out completely. I thought I would quickly follow Him into death but after a short while something surged inwardly to fill me back up, something akin to grief but much more intense and fitting, encompassing resentment and outrage and burning even hotter than these things. I began to quake from the inside out as this feeling overtook me, I became incandescent with it and for once in my life I allowed myself to burn.

154.

This thing was called Fury. There is no other word to describe it. It was an insane urge for vengeance against everyone who had harmed Him, it burned with accusation against Her and His brother and every last servant of Rome. Fury burst within me and I raged against what they had destroyed, condemning the whole world that lusts for cruelty over kindness, accusing the present world but also the crazed worlds of the future where His suffering is feted and admired. I sought retribution for the destruction of my beloved and every other man who harboured such courage in His heart, for the violence the world promulgates and has the presumption to call Love.

155.

Fury engulfs me and curses me in my turn. I was the one who cut off His power, it was my hand driving the blade. And even then I could have used His stolen strength to spirit us away, I spent the last of His power to console Him on the cross when I should never have allowed that to happen. I also hear Him accused: for His insistence on valour when sometimes it is better to hide, for His willingness to compensate for errors that were never His to resolve. But I cannot tolerate any slander of His memory and so I press my accusations against the ones who killed Him, He was innocent of everything except bravery and decency and I will not slander His name.

156.

Fury seeks a way out and suddenly I see Her. Holding Her dead love in Her arms, comforted by a group of luminous women. He looks just like my beloved but death was gentle with him, there is a serene look on his face and no marks disfigure his body. The faithlessness of this transaction pierces me because my love was the innocent one. He died protecting His foolish brother who had dived so thoughtlessly into love. Without thinking or pausing I storm down the pathways She created when She looked so greedily within me. She feels me rush towards Her and then I burst into Her vision, Her Sisters cannot see me but they see Her stiffen and claw at the air because now I am the one gripping Her face in my hands, it is me staring into Her soul for my purposes alone.

157.

She is appalled from the moment I grab Her face and Her horror only intensifies. She knows what She has done, there is no injustice in this, She has killed two innocent men and I am determined to show Her the horror of it. Every blow that He suffered, every time His flesh was torn, every drop of sweat and blood and heartbreak that poured out of His poor body. I ram words into Her soul that speak of this obscenity, in hushed tones but also in screams of pain and fear and humiliation. I show Her every detail of His death and how the world cried out against it because these were the Two who could have redeemed everything, if they had remained in Trinity with Her, they could have overcome the Romans as though they were wooden pieces on a board. If some patience had been shown, if some real love had prevailed in Her heart and not the avarice that has brought everything crashing down.

158.

Finally I reflect Her own image back to Her. It is the first time She has ever seen Herself truly and She is completely horrified, to see Her arrogance and Her presumption and Her wild deep grief at the loss of Her mother. She goes to plead that loss but it only stokes my Fury. I lay out brutal images of my own mother and the manner of her death, I show Her my mother protecting me at the precise moment that I lost her. I match Her grief and I surpass it and I say to Her: this is no excuse for multiplying suffering as you have done. I rebuke Her as She rebuked others so often in my sight: how dare you think that your suffering is worth more than other people's. With what you have caused, how dare you plead your grief against what all of us must grieve?

159.

I hold Her face in my hands for a very long time. Long enough to feel Her consciousness fracture and Her vision fail. I continue to accuse Her until She is completely overcome, then one hand at a time I let go of Her face, withdrawing out of that shared vision space and coming back to my own senses. As I do that my Fury breaks and finally I can feel some pity, for the burden of Her shame and how young She really is. There is no doubt that She genuinely loved them both, although Her favours turned unequal, I see that same love condemning Her even though She cannot actually die of grief. She sinks like a widowed queen under the weight of Her shame, and although Her Sisters try to soothe Her there is nothing to be done for Her.

160.

My Fury continues to break until I am left with nothing but pity. For all of us marooned here in this transitory kingdom, for everyone yet to enter this world of denial and pain. I feel a mad wish to follow my beloved and seek Him under worlds, but there is work that will keep me here and I know it is crucial work. If I had the slightest choice about it I would follow Him wherever He went, hoping to retrieve His soul, but worlds do not work that way and even if I died I would not find my way to Him. I am condemned to linger here to pick up the pieces of whatever has not been lost, to gather any fragment of the People that has not been scattered to the winds.

161.

Before I go I pause long enough to touch His feet. He would never ask anyone to wash His feet but I wipe them of the blood and the bloody grime left from His ordeal. His face is bowed but I can close my eyes and see Him as He once was beneath me, rather than dead and stiffening and hung as a warning to all. I see Him close to me and warm once again as I bend down to kiss him and these are visions I will never surrender. He will not hang lifeless in my dreams. He will come to me full of warmth and love and He will sigh as He did in those moments I was given to hold Him. Rising up towards the kisses of my mouth that I gave to Him so freely, kisses I wish that I had multiplied now that He slumps above me and is gone.

162.

I press my lips to His feet and then I turn away, walking back down the hill with Rome's brutal carnage around me. I know that my suffering is not unique. So many other women have suffered the way that I do, and this particular brand of suffering brutalises every one of us. Restraining the endless streams of love that should be flooding into the world, turning hearts towards hostility and dragging us into contempt. This landscape of horror that joins infinitely with horror from the past and the future. We call it history but only so we retain the strength to bear it. With the human heart thwarted at every turn, until something breaks and we break through or we are broken down completely and this cruel world ends, as it is bound to do, one way or the other.

BOOK 13

COMFORT THE PEOPLE

163.

For days after He was killed I wandered around the city. Not recalling quite where I wandered or where I slept. I had some vague idea that I should find His men, but He had told them to disperse and they did that very well. I did not care whether I was captured by the Watchmen of the City, and my carelessness for whether I lived or died rendered me even more spectral and grey and transparent to the people who passed me by. Not a single living being noticed me or challenged me or even really encountered me at all.

164.

As I wandered I passed by the place where He was crucified. I might have passed it more than once but not once did I look for His body. My grief had turned my soul very dull and to my dulled senses His death seemed no more tragic than the death of any other man. If I had retained some of His strength I might have gone looking for those responsible, but how would I distinguish them? This is the invulnerability of Empire: you do not know who to fight or who to kill even if you have the strength to do it. And I was never born to bear arms. I was brought into the world to bear witness, armed only with the forlorn hope that life might lose the power to keep me in the world, and that I might be released into death sooner rather than later.

165.

Days of wandering eased my grief just enough to bring me back to my senses. I found myself hungry and thirsty in a dry wash outside the limits of the city. I began to walk towards the head of the valley, exploring a few shaded gullies and digging down into the sand. Eventually I found a soak of sweet water at the terminus of a narrow ravine. I tasted the water dubiously at first and then I took huge draughts of the cool water that I let pool in my hands. I also washed myself the best I could, the sweet water flowing over my arms and face and neck as some of the dust was washed away. As I washed and my thirst abated I felt a bit of life come back into me, and it continued to flow as I knelt down by the spring and wiped the tear-tracks from my face and wondered what I should do.

166.

The only thing I could think of doing was to return to the caves. As dangerous as it might be I knew it had to be done. I rested for a while and then I began to walk the long way around, keeping watch for any spies, approaching the caves from the safety of the opposite ridge. As I walked up through waste ground and sparse oak forest I was tempted to turn back but I knew I had to continue. The People may have scattered but there may be some who remained, and if there were remnants they would be the youngest and most frightened of the children. He would have wanted me to gather them up, I felt certain of it, and bring them to safety if a safe place could be found. I trod the dusty path up to the crest of the ridge and I was surprised at how equably I could remember Him, thinking of His wishes without grief or horror, thinking of His care for the People that was always the best part of Him.

167.

When I came within view of the cave entrance it was getting late in the day. I lay flat against the ridge to silhouette any sign of movement. A long time passed but in the softening afternoon sun there was no movement at all. No equipment, no refuse, no sentries. The caves seemed completely abandoned but still I kept watch until the valley and both ridges sank into shadow. Eventually I got to my feet and started to creep down the near slope towards the opposite bank. As I reached and then crossed the valley floor the caves seemed so deserted that I wondered whether I might have returned to the wrong place. But the ground outside the caverns was perfectly familiar, as was the main entrance, although when I put my head inside the caves there was absolutely nothing to see.

168.

It was only when I pushed deeper into the caves that I encountered the few remaining People. They called for me to stop in tremulous voices and I saw them standing against me in the gloom, holding out sticks and cooking knives and shaking as they did so. They were willing to fight but these were the smallest and most malnourished of the children. They were brave but they showed how doomed Her dreams of a Slave Army really were. I walked gently towards them with my head bowed and I removed my veil. After a moment of hesitation they recognised me by my hair, and they dropped their crude weapons and ran across the cave to embrace me.

169.

Their story was bleak. Most of the People had scattered once it became clear that some disaster had happened. They fled in twos and threes and did not stop to consider the others. They sensed that She was gone and that Her power to protect them was withdrawn, they had seen Him gather up His men and they knew He would not return. Most shocking of all was the condition His brother was in before he fled with Her out of the caves, his look of terror in the face of imminent death that all of us know too well. The older ones fled but the youngest children know nothing but obedience to Her. They stay in these caves because She put them there and nobody can countermand Her order. They remember the bright power She commanded on Her wedding night, they believe She might yet return to lead them if they only have the faithfulness to wait.

170.

The children seek hope but I have a duty to show them the truth of what has happened. I pull the oldest one gently towards me, bringing our faces together, and although she has no skill in looking into me she gradually starts to see. I show her oblique images of the disaster and she begins to moan, saying no no no, and as she continues to look this is the only word she can utter. The others begin to tremble and they join in with her moaning because they recognise the sound of death when they hear it, they know our dream has ended in disaster and they cannot restrain their grief.

171.

My visions escape my control and they begin to play out in vivid stations across the walls of the cave. We see the wicked find His brother and drag his corpse out of his tomb, and how their magicians manage to reanimate him just long enough for his blood to flow again. Death left his body terribly degraded but some of his secrets remain, they drain out what is left of them and they drink his blood for its secrets. They also tear at his flesh, that has been decomposing for days, and these vile acts will be commemorated for the whole of the rest of history. Their Blood Magic shows them enough to consolidate their hold over the world. It is not the absolute victory that would have flowed from his living blood but the Romans triumph all the same.

172.

They profit by his blood but it is the Word that gives them their power. We are shown endless scenes of them preaching his Words of Love to their sighing slaves, they practice oppression under cover of these words and their slaves sigh all the more. The corrupted Word lulls every victim into passivity and their empire becomes spiritual, they steal the love out of their victims and they make them bow down as they do it. Raising up images of death and brutality in front of them, securing their complete surrender without a single drawn sword.

173.

But the Word is vast, as are the places where it spoken, and finding no other place in this world it comes suddenly back into me. My stilled tongue is loosened and I hear words spilling out from within me, announcing that I am no longer the Sealed Prophet it was ordained for me to be. Those seals are broken and I am commanded to testify by the Word that has been revealed to me, to set down a True Testament to His courage and His sacrifice, shoring it against their lies until I am no longer resident in my body. Lines that will identify me when He storms back into the world, and remind me of Him in those many lifetimes when He does not appear. But I am mostly commanded to set down words to be signposts upon the path, some comfort to the weary traveller who yet presses on alone.

174.

My first act of leadership is to cast off the name She gave me. I tell the children that I am now bound to this soil because of the blood that was shed here, I say that Ruth no longer fits me as a name if it ever did. I tell them the name my mother gave me, translated from my mother's tongue, and I say that from now on amongst the People I will be known as Shoshana. I ask them to repeat my new name and each time it gets louder in their mouths: Shoshana, Shoshana. I tell them they are also free to select new names for themselves, and in fact it is fitting that they do so, because their names were given to them in an exercise of power and they still have the flavour of slave names. I see one slight boy practicing the name of my beloved on his lips, he seems like a brave boy and he would be blessed to live under the aegis of that name. As I am blessed to remain amongst the People, with a voice within me calling them the Shoshannim, knowing that my work is to tend to them and nurture them even if I cannot do it alone.

175.

Our next aim will be to locate Peter. And as many of His men as we can find. My beloved said as much that day in the Garden and I know how crucial it is. There are truths scattered amongst their books of lies and this is one bedrock truth: that everything depends upon us coming together, that we must join together and look after one other and hold all of our things in common. And to spread throughout the world what was always the best aspect of the People. I see vague scenes where we drift northwards until we come to quieter places, places where the Romans have become sedentary and might allow us to live in safety. This close to the Holy City everything is violence and madness, from their commerce and their unrepentant bargaining in souls, from their Gods who demand burnt offerings and who lust to humiliate and enslave.

176.

The children have not been sleeping, and when the excitement of my arrival subsides they fall into sudden sleep. Wrapping their grimy cloaks around themselves, closing their eyes to the world. I am left wakeful with them scattered all around me on the floor of the cave, still thinking how I might contact His men or move us to safety until we find them. I think of reaching out to Her but Her presence is now completely gone out of these caves. She sinks back out of the world so completely that there is no longer any way for me to reach Her. When I shook off the name She gave me I broke the last connection between us, and in the absence of Her dominant light I feel my own radiance swelling gently to fill the caves, a softer and more golden light shining without need of dominion. For what good is it to liberate a slave only to bend them to your will?

177.

I pray that I will be able to sleep tonight. It has been so long since I had any proper rest. The darkness brings its own fears but for the moment I am too tired to worry about that. My visions can't be interpreted when I am this short of sleep and it is a relief to see nothing except what is laid out in front of me. I have a mat to sleep on, with my veil rolled as a pillow. I have water and a little bread and that will do for now. There is the lamp I will trim and the darkness I will welcome in. I might say a formal prayer that I be granted restful sleep, and for protection to come down over us for this our last night in these caves. I pray to be given sleep without visions of the past or the future, I ask for one night that my sleep not be troubled by dreams.

يهوذا
יהודה
(Yehuda)

GETHSEMANE

I

VERY EARLY IN the morning one of Her girls comes to wake me. She is shy and barely touches my shoulder but I am half-awake already and I turn towards her slowly. I smile and say thank you and she stares at me for a moment before disappearing back into the caves.

II

LYING THERE FOR a moment I try to make sense of my dreams. I dreamed that I was sleeping and that I woke up to find myself in a cavern deep underground with crowds of people milling around. Some were screeching abuse at me while others were in tears, I was obscured behind some kind of scrim and nobody could decide how to interpret me. The scene began flashing and changing until people were hurling insults and praise at me simultaneously, until there came a flash of lightning and a terrible clap of thunder and the curtain was ripped in two. The people groaned to see me revealed and they sank to their knees in agony.

III

I DO NOT want to get up but I know we need to set off as early as possible. I pull on my cloak and fasten my sandals as I look out towards the entrance to the caves. I can see from where I am that it is still gloomy outside and the sunrise looks a fair way off. I do not want to go but I chastise myself against such laziness and cowardice, I need to go out and assemble the men and get us to the place where She has told me to be.

IV

SHE WOULD HAVE set off with my brother as soon as the moon allowed, and unless they are already captured they should be well clear of the Holy City. I agreed to buy them some time and so I will, especially for the duration of this day if I can manage it. Travelling by night they have some protection but in the daylight She loses Her power. I asked how much time She needed and She would not tell me. As much time as possible, is all that I could get from Her. Every hour of sunshine I can win for them will increase our chances, and save us from the secrets She has been foolish enough to reveal.

V

THE LAST THING I did to my brother was lie to him. He looked so panicked and hunted that the truth would not have helped him. I struck my hand against his chest to stick some courage to him, I clapped him on his pale cheeks and I tried to make him laugh. For all of his faults he was always well intentioned. He is full of himself but he has never harmed

anybody and God knows I can't make that boast. He should have been left to his poetry and his songs of Love and his dreams about the Kingdom of Heaven. He was never built to face the ordeal She has thrust upon him.

VI

SHE IS DISTRAUGHT but I won't spare Her any blame. She should have protected him and loved him like the mother She claimed to be. Her perverse wedding has torn everything apart, She was seduced by his words and he had no strength to refuse Her. He keeps no vows and so he lacks any moral foundation, although I doubt that even the strongest vows would be enough to counter Her desire.

VII

I TOLD MY brother that we would see each other again. Even though my heart tells me this is also untrue. I told him this whole mess could be remedied but that was just to bolster his courage. Between each falsehood I glanced over at Her but She didn't seek to correct me. I told him that I loved him, that was the very last thing I said as I kissed him goodbye. And in the instant that I said it, I am sorry to say, it was just another one of my lies.

VIII

IN THE HALF-LIGHT I walk out to where most of the men are sleeping. I hesitate for a moment, wondering if I should head out alone and leave them there to sleep. But I know how

appalled they would be if I left without them, they would rush out in every direction trying to find where I had gone. They seem destined to walk with me for just a little longer and so I go around one by one and wake them up. The first ones groan when I push them and say: wake up. Wake up boys. But as soon as a couple of them are up they sense the urgency and they begin to leap into action, quickly rousing everyone until they are all standing around me, stretching and murmuring quietly and pulling their cloaks around them.

IX

KNOWING THAT THIS moment is coming I turn towards the men and pull back my hood. There is a shocked silence as they see what is left of my hair. They are aghast but I laugh and strike some poses, and soon they begin to laugh with me saying: Roman, Roman, do you envy your brother that much? They gather around me to rough up my hair and to feel how soft my face is, I play the fool in the early morning as we bolster our courage with laughter.

X

AS WE READY ourselves to go I see Lily standing quietly at a distance, dressed and clutching some bags and a waterskin. I walk over to her to tell her to stay behind but there is something about her that weakens my resolve. I know that she means to come, and shorn of my hair I lack the strength to oppose that even if I wanted to. I have no power to compel her, unless it were to save her life, and if she means to come with us I cannot forbid her from doing so.

XI

WE SET OUT as soon as there is light enough to see, carrying light gear and provisions. Enough food for one or two days. Lily trails behind us and there is no question from the men about that. They do ask where we are going but I just smile and tell them that they will see when we get there. They have followed me this far without question and it's only a little way further as we move quickly over the dewy ground. The eastern sky brightens as we climb through hills full of olive trees and pine groves and grapevines, the vinedressers already at work at their vines. We cross a saddle between two low hills and then a rough path takes us down until we descend into the garden of Gethsemane.

XII

AS WE WALK a peaceful mood comes over me. A feeling of being watched over, that this is the true path I am supposed to walk no matter how harsh it becomes. An intense peace falls down over me from the trees we pass beneath, coming to absolve me and to clear my heart and I would like to walk under those trees forever. I form the clear impression that I have walked this way before, sometimes in the company of comrades and sometimes going alone. These feelings come effortlessly and in the clear morning the men seem soothed by such feelings as well.

XIII

WHEN WE REACH the garden we rest and drink water and then it comes time for me to explain. I tell the men at the

outset that I do not know the full story and that is the absolute truth. I tell them that my brother is being hunted and that if he is taken by the Romans the whole world will go into ruin. I have come here to buy time for him, to create a diversion that will allow him to escape. The men are troubled by this and they ask me what I need from them and I say: just to rest up under these trees for a day. Set a couple of sentries and come warn me if anyone comes. Otherwise just stay where you are, get some rest, and do not approach me when I go out into the sun.

XIV

THE MEN ARE confused and resistant and I don't blame them. Why I would speak about the destruction of the world, why I have taken on the appearance of my brother. They guess that I am a proxy to be offered in his place, and they know what the Romans will do to me if they find I have cheated them of their prize.

XV

THEIR TRUST FRACTURES and they openly dissent but Peter stands up in front of them and declares to me: I have followed you this far. I swore I would follow you to the ends of the earth and it looks like I might be held to that. And turning to the others he says: Men. There is nothing holding you here. None of you are cowards, and you have all served with honour and distinction. If you wish to depart us now there is no shame in doing it, just be honourable and stand up and tell us that's what you'll do. Not a single one of the men stands up and Peter sits back down again and all of them remain where

they are. I tell them again that they should get some rest, in the heavy shade or in the cool of the adjacent grotto. This might be the last bit of rest they get for a long time.

XVI

THE MORNING SUN feels hot as I walk up the rocky slope above the garden. Lily follows behind me without any complaint. The climb is stiff but not long and we soon reach the gravesites at the place where the peak flattens out. I know this is the appointed place and that we have come here just in time. I turn to Lily who nods at me as I say: stay in the shade the best you can. Watch carefully for anyone who comes. Never speak of this to anybody. Thank you for staying with me.

XVII

I WALK OUT into the direct sunlight and I find some level ground. I kneel down because I don't know what else to do. I say some prayers but that seems unnecessary so I dispense with them and simply kneel there under the morning sun. The heat on my shorn head feels strange but it is not an unpleasant strangeness. I bow my head down as low as it will go and the heat of the sun draws down into me. It is a kind of strength but not like my former strength, it feels dark and dangerous and it speaks to parts of me that were buried beneath my vows. I feel Lily watching me and I find with some surprise that my feelings for her have turned dark and hot as well.

XVIII

AS THIS POWER streams into me more and more it tells me what I am. I am the Dark Son, kneeling in His ruined strength amongst the remnants of the dead. I feel the strength that is lost to me but I also feel the heavy fragments I still wield, and I know that even with a blunt weapon I could slay more enemies with these end parts of my strength than I ever could before. The darkness gathers and begins to swirl around me, with flashes of blacklight that could rip the skin and the viscera from the vulnerable bodies of men, that could consume endless amounts of human flesh and human blood and never be satiated. This power within me swells and bloats outwardly and my inner sight heaves open and suddenly I see Them.

XIX

AT THE EXACT time I see Them I also burst into their vision. A rebellious slave invested with power beyond the powers of Rome, bringing down hordes in vengeance upon their brutal empire. They are terrified and try to scatter but I do not let them hide. I monopolise their vision and taunt them with their stupidity, to let me marry Her when they could have taken us and killed us at any time. And now we are joined I tell them what they most fear: that we have limitless numbers of liberated slaves in every imaginable location, and that even now She is rushing around the countryside activating these cells for war. When you struck at one cell, I tell them, it only divided into many new ones. But mostly I boast of my new strength, now I am joined with Her, I dare them to come at me with as many men as they can muster and watch me smash their legions into pieces.

XX

I FEEL THEIR consternation and I multiply it endlessly. With words not as refined as my brother's but having a blunt force he could never wield. I tell them that they will be hunted and brought down and cast out of the world, that there will be neither mercy nor exile nor any other kind of reprieve. Whatever brutality they visited upon the People will be repaid to them a hundredfold and I show them images of these things, stored up in my darkest parts, from the losses I have sustained and the losses amongst my men. I bleed our dark blood over their maps of the world and it corrupts every part of their vision, they gibber in fear because they see me destined towards a New Throne, towards a New Kingdom where they will be broken under our chariots, and their hearts fed to the wolves who will rally to every side of my throne.

XXI

I CONTINUE TO burn and rage in the sun but I also offer them bargains. If they will bow down to me, and let me take up their reins, then I might spare them to be made ensigns and foot soldiers of the Empire to come. I show them the true savagery of this New Rome, when it returns to being suckled by a She-Wolf and being judged by Her as well. I lay claim to direct Her powers and I tell them: I will say who lives and who dies in this new dispensation, and that even for a chance at a merciful death you would be wise to bow down and worship me and proclaim me as your King.

XXII

THE ROMANS TREMBLE but they do not lack in cunning. As my strength wanes a little they try to find ways towards me, wheedling and cadging trying to find out where I am. They express concern for my welfare and offer to come to me with supplies of food and wine and also with fighting men. I just laugh and ask them whether I seem like I seek comfort, whether food or drink or protection has the least bit of interest to me.

XXIII

AS I BURN there in the sun I send out contradictory messages that they find maddening to untangle. I hint that I might be deceiving them, that my talk of a slave revolt is just my peculiar joke and that I am simply Her jilted lover who is seeking His revenge. Or that I stole secrets from Her which they may be interested to purchase, that I can be bought for gold or silver or indulgence in women and wine. I hint that I have always been Her enemy, that I was a plant in their camp who seduced Her with stolen words, that I methodically stored up Her secrets and will sell them to the highest bidder.

XXIV

THESE TAUNTS AND responses draw on for many hours without much change, and they do not turn towards any resolution. I reiterate my threats and offers and boasts but more and more I just kneel in the sun and burn as they look towards me. Because this is the most important thing: that I dominate their vision for as long as possible, so they lack the

sight to turn towards my brother, or towards Her and Her Sisters as they try to undo what She has done.

XXV

I RETREAT OUT of the sun a few times to where Lily is watching. I choke down some water but I can't stomach any food. She gazes at me steadily despite how unsteady I must look. The sun has burnt my skin where my hair was cut away, it feels stretched and raw and it will worsen before the sun goes down. The glow of the Black Sun completely infuses me and I feel profoundly mad with it, I must look totally insane to Lily but she never once looks away.

XXVI

MY STRENGTH BEGINS to fail. My last reservoirs are almost empty and I know they have come to suspect it. As the day wanes it becomes harder to keep up my pretence, they see the frayed edges of my power and suspect that I might be deceiving them. But I retain the distinct impression that they believe I am the one they seek, that this trick survives even if they now doubt what power I have within me.

XXVII

AS THE SUN gets low in the sky I come back into the shade for the final time. Lily offers me water but I cannot drink, and I am forced to lie down for a little while before I can face the walk back downhill. My head throbs savagely and I feel unsteady on my feet but we eventually make it down. Some

of the of the men have finally fallen asleep, just in time for me to wake them and tell them the unwelcome news I bear.

XXVIII

WITH THE MEN gathered around me I thank them for staying with me for the day, and also for their faith in me as strange as things must seem. I tell them that I need just a little more faith from them, just for a short while. I have never presumed to command them but on this evening I am forced to abandon that and tell them: you need to get your things together and leave this place and disperse. Some things may happen tonight and tomorrow that I wish I could prevent. I don't know much about them yet but I do know you need to leave me for a few days. If anyone comes to lay hands on you or arrest you then you need to be smart about it. You must say that you do not know me, and you must deny being any part of the People. Keep your heads down if they come for you, play dumb or curse me if it will keep you safe. Whatever you need to do, until it passes over.

XXIX

THE MEN HAVE been patient with me on this strange day but my last request is too much. They loudly object to it and they shout out that we are sworn comrades, that we do not abandon one other even if that means death. I am moved by their courage and their loyalty but I manage to staunch my tears and say: I believe every last one of you. But trouble might be coming that you cannot imagine, and if you need to save your lives I want you to do what it takes. And remember: I asked you for this. If you find yourselves denying me, or

even swearing that you hate me, remember that I wanted you to do it.

XXX

THE MEN GRUMBLE but they pack up their gear and divide what is left of the food. They are tough and resourceful and I have no real fears for them. Lily produces the necklace of silver coins that I refused to take from Her, and I suddenly feel very glad for the gift of all that silver. I cut the cords and slide the coins clinking out into our treasurer's hands. He doles them out amongst the men with his customary fairness, he offers a share to me and to Lily but both of us refuse to take it. He puts those last coins back in to the common purse, they will form the basis of new streams of silver once the Brothers reassemble themselves.

XXXI

PETER IS THE last to leave. He comes forward to embrace me and says quietly in my ear: let the others disperse but bring me with you. Your strength is ruined, and this stupid thing you have done with your hair. You couldn't resist a single one of them and they will come for you in droves. You know how strong I am, he says as he grasps my arms. Are you going to make me remind you of it?

XXXII

I CLAP HIM on his broad back and say: you know I would take you with me if I could. But you are the most important one,

Peter. Out of any of us, you are the one who can continue the work. He is puzzled by my words as he often is, but he slowly relaxes his grip on me and says with a smile: you are insane, you know. You always were. The only problem is that I'm mad enough to admire you. He kisses me on both cheeks and looks at me with his crinkled eyes and says: they might write about us one day. Make sure you give the fuckers something to write about. Then he turns away abruptly, gathers up his things, and disappears into the twilight just as I asked him to.

XXXIII

IN THE END only Lily is left, standing quietly amongst the gnarled branches of an olive tree. She has collected our few things and I ask her: ready? And she nods quickly and looks at me again with those clear pale eyes of hers. She is never ashamed to look at me but I still find myself looking away.

XXXIV

AMONGST SO MANY strange things this might well be the strangest. I have renounced my strength and my exertions under the Black Sun have drained out what was left. Yet if she is with me I will have no fear. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. She is tall and strong but any of the men would be stronger. Peter looks like he is carved out of granite and yet he could never protect me the way that she can.

XXXV

THIS STRANGE SILENT girl from the northern places. Who stands in her ready strength, wearing the colours of a lion. I have known the partial rations of a She-Wolf but Lily is something much rarer than that. And I feel called to the same kind of rarity, because she sees me coming to her now dressed in the skin of a lion. The Lion of Judah, she teaches me, in days to come I will be called Lion when my hand is upon the neck of my enemies. And in those days she will stand beside me like a lioness, and out of our joint strength will come such sweetness, when our suffering is transformed into Pride and our people stretch outwards to every corner of the earth. And what is sweeter than honey, she asks me. And what is stronger than a lion?

XXXVI

LILY SMILES AS she confirms the truth of one last thing. How we have always been together, in countless lives before, how we are always lost to one another before our lives can really begin. Her smile is soft but these truths are hard enough to break my heart. But she reminds me of the corresponding truth: that when a heart breaks it always breaks open. I see countless lifetimes of heartbreak opening us irrevocably to one other, I see this lifetime buttressing our story and the space our hearts can share.

XXXVII

IN THAT OPEN space between us we walk side-by-side out of the garden. Towards cruelty already intimated to us, like the

cruelty we suffered before. But I know as she takes my hand that we are destined to return some day, to enter back into the Garden when the world is made new, when the flint cracks open to reveal watersprings and cruelty has been banished from every last place upon the Earth.

XXXVIII

AND I WILL know what paths will lead us there, and she will know the words to sing.

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